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Title: The advisory function of the Tales of the Prophets (*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*)

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Abstract of the PhD Thesis

This thesis examines the advisory function of the tales of three prophets (Joseph, David and Solomon) in al-Ṭabarī's (d. 923/310 AH) *History* and al-Tha'labī's (d. 1025/416) *Tales of the Prophets* within their religio-political contexts in Baghdād and Nīshāpūr respectively. The hypothesis is that by reading the tales through the prism of Islamic advice literature, in particular the works of Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 757 / 139) and Kay Kā'ūs (d. 1084 /476), one sees how these stories convey important ideas about *just leadership*, *friendship* and *enmity*. The thesis, which is based on both a close textual and contextual reading of the tales, contrasts the perspective of the centre (Baghdād), where al-Ṭabarī lived and where caliphal power was situated in the late ninth century, with the view from the edge of the empire (Nīshāpūr), where al-Tha'labī lived in a religiously vibrant society.

This dissertation, which comprises five chapters, begins by describing the genre of the *Tales of the Prophets* (*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) as *adab* (cultivated literature), because such works recapture pre-Islamic values and adapt them to Muslim contexts. Al-Ṭabarī's view from the centre with respect to leadership is characterized by its deliberate distance from non-Islamic monarchical images and its suspicion of Ṣūfism. Al-Tha'labī's position on the edge, on the other hand, weds royal images with Ṣūfī ideas, while cautioning against the excessive asceticism of the mystical tradition in Nīshāpūr. For leaders at the centre friendship relies on receiving good counsel which has the positive effect of creating stability in the Empire, whereas for leaders on the edge friendship promotes social harmony. Lastly, the centre and the edge both view enmity as emerging from the leaders' family circle, but they advise leaders to practise diplomacy as *jihād* in order to win genuine converts. The centre promotes *ṣabr* (patient endurance) when confronting enmity, while the edge recommends prayer in coping with grief over calamities. Overall, the tales of the prophets are more than stories; they are lessons in leadership.

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted for another degree or professional qualification. The thesis is approximately 96,500 words long.

Sami Helewa, S.J.

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Sami Helewa, S.J.

IJMES TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM
FOR ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKISH

CONSONANTS

A = Arabic, P = Persian, OT = Ottoman Turkish, MT = Modern Turkish

	A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT
ء	ʾ	ʾ	ʾ	—	ز	z	z	z	z	ك	k	k or g	k or ñ	k or n
ب	b	b	b	b or p	ژ	—	zh	j	j				or y	or y
پ	—	p	p	p	س	s	s	s	s				or ğ	or ğ
ت	t	t	t	t	ش	sh	sh	ş	ş	گ	—	g	g	g
ث	th	s	s	s	ص	ş	ş	ş	s	ل	l	l	l	l
ج	j	j	c	c	ض	ḍ	ẓ	ẓ	z	م	m	m	m	m
چ	—	ch	ç	ç	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	t	ن	n	n	n	n
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	h	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	z	ه	h	h	h ¹	h ¹
خ	kh	kh	h	h	ع	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	—	و	w	v or u	v	v
د	d	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	g or ğ	g or ğ	ي	y	y	y	y
ذ	dh	z	z	z	ف	f	f	f	f	ة	a ²			
ر	r	r	r	r	ق	q	q	ḳ	k	ال	³			

¹ When h is not final. ² In construct state: at. ³ For the article, al- and -l-.

VOWELS

ARABIC AND PERSIAN				OTTOMAN AND MODERN TURKISH	
Long	ا or آ	ā		ā	{ words of Arabic and Persian origin only
	و	ū		ū	
	ي	ī		ī	
Doubled	آي	iy (final form ī)		iy (final form ī)	
	وو	uww (final form ū)		uvv	
Diphthongs	او	au or aw		ev	
	اي	ai or ay		ey	
Short	ا	a		a or e	
	و	u		u or ü / o or ö	
	ي	i		ı or i	

For Ottoman Turkish, authors may either transliterate or use the modern Turkish orthography.

0.1 Prologue

Biblical prophets have a prominent place in the Qurʾān and later in the Islamic literature of the Middle Ages, including the period of the ninth to the eleventh centuries. Interest in ancient prophets grew among Muslims after the emergence of the *Sīra*¹ which is the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad. Accordingly, during the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty, a new genre of writing emerged which is known as the *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (Tales of the prophets). These tales were repeatedly written in different epochs of Islamic history. Their authors or compilers have organised the information about ancient prophets in a chronological manner, starting with Adam, the first man, and ending with the Prophet Muḥammad. This chronology of prophets portrays them as one genealogical family.

The genealogical link between the prophets parallels the dynastic inheritance of the caliphate under ʿAbbāsīd rule. The ʿAbbāsīd caliphs belonged to one family. Given that the *qīṣaṣ* (stories) emerged when the caliphate was gradually losing its power in the ninth and tenth century, I propose that the tales of the prophets could be read as advisory stories for the caliphs in the context of their political responsibilities and, by extension, for their successors, the sulṭāns and local rulers of the late Middle Ages. The coincidence of the emergence of the *qīṣaṣ* with the caliphal downfall

¹ The *Sīra* means a way of conduct or a biography of a notable figure like the Prophet Muḥammad. It did not first appear during the first century of Islam as an independent genre or as an origin of Islamic historiography. Initially the Muslim interest was more on the Prophet's expedition, *al-maghāzī*, from sources which originated from Medina, the city of the first established Muslim community under the Prophet Muḥammad. It is in the second century when *Sīra* became widespread outside Medina, thanks to Ibn Ishāq's (d. 767/150) extant *Sīra* of the Prophet, and from which the Muslim interest in prophecy grew through the thematic *nubūwa* and Qurʾānic related narratives. Through the *Sīra*, major Muslim themes emerged which related to issues of prophecy, community (*umma*), crisis (*fitna*) and conquest (*futūḥ*). See Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins: the beginnings of Islamic historical writing* (Princeton, New Jersey: the Darwin Press, Inc, 1998), 147-149 & 220. One of *Sīra*'s main characteristics is situating the Prophet Muḥammad among the prophets of earlier communities and highlighting his statesmanship to an international profile. See W. Raven "Sīra" in *ET*², volume 9 (1997), 662.

suggests that Muslim expectation of leadership was already in place. The purpose of the *qiṣaṣ* may result from the ideal of Islamic leadership facing the reality of the political Muslim rulers. In short, the *qiṣaṣ* seemingly emerge to confront and respond to the causes of corruption found in the personal characters of the rulers.

Granted there were advisors whom the caliph consulted and court secretaries who would write instructive manuals in the art of governance in order to assist the rulers – *Mirrors for Princes* and epistles – but the nature of their advice was preventative and precautionary rather than confrontationally righting an existing wrong. Besides, these advisors were employed by the caliph to work inside his court. In comparison, the selected compilers of the *qiṣaṣ* were not necessarily court employees; rather, they tended to be religious scholars in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and in scriptural exegesis. In general, religious scholars enjoyed some independence from politics, though they often benefitted from political patronage and contacts.

The *qiṣaṣ* are not the only narrative form of writing. In Arabic terminology, prose narrative could be of different types: *qiṣaṣ* (stories, narrative prose); *sīra* (a way of acting, a biography); *ḥadīth* (accounts of sayings and deeds of a prophet); *ḥikāya* (story telling); *samāra* (an entertaining night-time story); *khurāfa* (a myth of incredible nature); *uṣṭūra* (a legend without historical foundation); *nādira* (an anecdote or witty story); *khabar* (a factual detail, a piece of history); *mathal* (a proverb or parable); *maqāma* (an assembly); and *nabāʾ*² (a story that is common in the Qurʾān).² As suggested earlier, the *qiṣaṣ* as a genre of writing aim to instruct but also to amuse an audience. They could be categorized as *qiṣṣa* (a story in singular), a

² Claude Gilliot, “Narratives”, in *EQ*, volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 517.

nādira or simply a *mathal* to encourage Muslims towards following an exemplary ethical model.

The *qīṣaṣ*, in general, emerged in the cultural milieu of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* whose members were collectors of the sayings and deeds (*Sunna*) of the Prophet Muḥammad or of his close companions with careful consideration of the authenticity of sources. Sources which go back to either to the Prophet or one of his close Companions, as given by reliable transmitters,³ were deemed to have higher degrees of authenticity⁴ than those sources which reach back as far as the first generation of other Muslims. The *ḥadīth* in general serve as a data bank for many Islamic writings, such as the *tafsīrs*, the *Sīra* (biography of the Prophet) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence); the *qīṣaṣ* of the Middle Ages are no exception. In general the *qīṣaṣ* include compendia of *ḥadīth* accounts, of varying degrees of authenticity, about the prophets in history, but they are also written in narrative prose and are descriptive of the challenges faced by the prophets. They tell stories as a means of advice, while the source accounts of the prophets are a common feature in the *qīṣaṣ* narrative of the Middle Ages.

Regardless of how we classify the *qīṣaṣ*, narrative in the Qur’ān has a different purpose from the narrative in other scriptures such as the Jewish Torah; in the latter the narrative highlights an action or event within a specific time in history.⁵ In the case of the Qur’ān, the narrative does not deal specifically with a historical

³ A transmitter could only transmit what he heard without adding any detailed fabrication to the content or source; he ought to be a reputable pious Muslim, a qualified *ḥāfiẓ* and an aspiring scholar. See John Burton, *An introduction to the ḥadīth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 110-112.

⁴ Authenticity of sources is a major separate topic in medieval Islam. Its significance with respect to the *qīṣaṣ* was on the restrictions imposed on storytellers such as to narrate stories of prophets which were only in harmony with the Qur’ānic narrative accounts of prophets. See Sahair el-Calamawy, “Narrative elements in the ḥadīth literature”, in *Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period*, edited by A.F.L Beeston, T.M Johnstone, R.B Serjeant and G.R Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 309.

⁵ Angelika Neuwirth, “Myths and legends in the Qur’ān”, in *EQ*, volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 480.

situation but rather with a moral paradigm of good versus evil, “*Al-amr bi-l ma‘rūf wa-l nahy ‘an al-munkar.*”⁶ Historical development is not the central theme of the narrative in the Qur’ān. Thus any identification with a community, before or after the advent of the Prophet Muḥammad, is judged in terms of its moral standard rather than its historical significance.

This may be contested with respect to the narratives in the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā* ⁷, since different compilers have arranged these accounts in various ways and have added narrative details about the prophets which may well pertain to the issues of their time. In fact, these *qīṣaṣ*, though they are not historiographies *per se*, have or demonstrate a particular pre-supposition of history as sacred time, marked by the prophetic heralds divinely selected to lead their people. The narrative details of the *qīṣaṣ* are consequently historically influenced because they refer to prophets who had historical foundations; the compilers too were culturally influenced.

In addition, these tales reflect Islamic medieval interest in the search for the meaning of being a Muslim in the history of the world, given that by the ninth century Islam had expanded well beyond Arabia. Since Muslims view prophets as one family from Adam to Muḥammad, the *qīṣaṣ* have become the Muslim voice of integration into the world-history of the prophets. Consequently, despite the use of fantasies in the narratives of the *qīṣaṣ* in addition to the *ḥadīth* sources, they are not devoid of the meaning of integration for Muslims in a rapidly growing faith. There is thus a need to study the *qīṣaṣ* as mirrors of history which advise the rulers that their political duties are an integral part of their religious beliefs.

⁶ In English translation it is “Command the right and forbid the evil”. See Q 3:110; 7:157.

0.1.1 Qışaş: legends and myths.

In addition to the *ḥadīth* base to the tales, other literary elements associated with the *qışaş* are myths and legends. There is a distinction between narrative legend and myth. Myths explain the world through archetypes or patterns usually staged in a cosmic framework.⁷ One example of an archetype is the continuous struggle between good and evil. A myth personifies or demonizes supernatural powers working in a narrative character to portray virtuous excellence or evil.⁸ Myths are an ancient form of storytelling; for example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* explains the pattern of the universal human search for immortality.

Legends, on the other hand, lack universal cosmic appeal which is replaced by pious imaginative detail in order to exemplify a narrative figure. In essence, legends are about saints, prophets or heroes regardless of their social status.⁹ The *qışaş al-anbiyāʾ*³ as such include legends of prophets and saints. However, not all the *qışaş* include the story of the Prophet Muḥammad as a legend lest his story in history be undermined. Since the *ḥadīth* highlight the life of Muḥammad, some *qışaş* have the story of Muḥammad in the background. *Qışaş* function as hagiographical legends of ancient prophets and their spiritual strengths. There are thus two narrative sides of the *qışaş*: legend and myth.

The legend aspect of the *qışaş* is the more obvious place to begin. Each *qışaş* is given the title of the name of the prophet it represents. Hence the emphasis on a prophetic figure is already spelled out before reading the narrative details. The *qışaş* of Nūḥ (Noah) is about the legend of Nūḥ before we get into the details of his

⁷ Neuwirth, "Myths and legends", 477.

⁸ Neuwirth, "Myths and legends", 478.

⁹ Ján Knappert, *Islamic legends*, volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 1.

floating ship of humanity during the flood. As these *qiṣaṣ* highlight the exemplary lives of holy figures, they also represent a whole system of belief, rational theology, narrative cultural representation, and a society which associates itself with Islam in the wider history of salvation. Such aspects are embedded in the plot as a cultural representation orchestrated by the compiler in his narrative arrangement. Therefore the *qiṣaṣ* are more than a study of narrative figures.

If we take the story of Jesus in the *qiṣaṣ* we find a different representation of Jesus from that of Christianity, wherein even the canonical Gospels give different representations of the messianic figure. For example, the Gospel of Mark raises the question of whether the Son of God is indeed the Messiah.¹⁰ Luke's Gospel portrays Jesus as a Saviour.¹¹ Thus the Markan and Lucan communities have reflected on their religious association with Jesus as the Messiah and Lord respectively. The Lordship of Jesus is the underlying theme of a Palestinian- Jewish society in the first century of Christianity. In the early second century, the Gospel of John reflects a Christian community who were exiled from the Jewish one, thus finding themselves on the edge of Jewish society. In a similar fashion, each writer of the *qiṣaṣ* portrays a slightly different social theme behind a specific important prophetic figure in comparison to other prophets – such as the asceticism of Jesus reflecting a Muslim society with an ascetic values, if not a Ṣūfī/mystical orientation. The differences in these accounts show the special perspective of each medieval Islamic community that the *qiṣṣa* represents. This suggests that the *qiṣaṣ* are (also myths of) narrative reflections concerning prophets in history, voiced in specific Islamic contexts.

¹⁰ See the Gospel of Mark 14:61-62: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "I am". *The Holy Bible*, NRSV (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 53.

¹¹ Luke 2:18, *The Holy Bible*, 58.

The idea of myth and its connection with history was raised by a literary critic Northrop Frye. History is too important to leave it to the historians. Frye points to relevant mythological insights.¹² The Greek word *mythos* means the fictional plot of a story as opposed to historical fact. Frye explains that the myths have a primary function which is to teach a society something of importance pertaining to its existence. Myths are a means of showing serious social concerns which are not irrelevant to history. This connection between history and myth is well preserved in Frye's use of literary categories. Frye refers to *factum* as opposed to *datum*.¹³ Historical writing depends on *datum* (fact or datum of an event such as a date of birth/death) while myths reveal *factum* (the reality or meaning of a social existence as opposed to social appearance). The *factum* argument is essential to myths. Myths are about reality (such as an ideology prevalent in a society) which goes beyond historical data and refuses to be confined by facts. The narrative of myth draws a line, Frye says, around a specific culture and takes an inward look at society rather than an outward look towards natural sciences.¹⁴ This inward look essentially shows the literary structure of a story and the knowledge of the society it addresses.

Frye's thoughts on myths open up a new vista on *qışaş* in relation to Muslim societies. This invites two questions of relevance to the study of the *qışaş*. Firstly, how do the *qışaş* reflect the reality (*factum*) of a Muslim culture and society? This depends upon the compiler of the text and the cultural influences which shaped his religious thoughts. All the influences on the compiler are cultural considerations

¹² Northrop Frye, *The great code. The Bible and literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 32-33. For a critique of Frye's position on myth, see William G. Doty, *Mythography: the study of myths and rituals* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1986), 179-182. For the definition of myth and its function in describing the world intended by the narrative, see Eric Csapo, *Theories of mythology* (Malden-MA: Blackwell publishing, 2005), 1-9.

¹³ Frye, *The great code*, 37.

¹⁴ Frye, *The great code*, 37.

which have historical realities (e.g., the compiler's mentors, his legal orientation or *madhhab*, exegetical and linguistic skills, and so on).

Secondly, the *qiṣaṣ* transmit knowledge of their societies at two levels: the theological confession of the Oneness of God and God's will (*irāda*) prevalent in the narrative plot; and the sociological aspects, such as the writer's thoughts, his editing procedure and the pious attitude of his audience. In addition, the *qiṣaṣ* were compiled and re-written by religious elite – the '*ulamā*' – capable of drawing out the religious identity of Islam from exemplary prophets. This Islamic identity in a medieval society is the product of an inward look into a culture prepared to live by Qur'ānic ideals. The narrative detail which includes the sacred manifested in miracles – mythical in description – offers legitimization of the prophetic message. For example, the accounts of the birth of Abraham in some *qiṣaṣ* entail cosmic settings (his nativity is preceded by a cosmic sign, an interplay between the cosmos and the advent of a prophet). There is thus enough literary evidence that *qiṣaṣ* and myths are related narratives, and it is time to study the *qiṣaṣ* as an inward look into Muslim society.

0.1.2 The necessity of a new study of the *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā*'

The *qiṣaṣ* seem to have dual functions. As carriers of myths they function as mirrors of history reflecting the social culture of the compiler, but as legends the *qiṣaṣ* can serve as advisory literature to the temporal leaders as far as their social and political conduct is concerned. These two functions are the underlying pre-suppositions of this thesis which aims to present a thematic study of the *qiṣaṣ* pertaining to the relations of rulers with their subjects. The prime relational themes

chosen for analysis here are *just leadership*, *friendship* and *enmity*. Leadership pertains to the capacity of a Muslim ruler to rule justly over people for their protection and well-being. The friendship aspect is another personal capacity of a ruler to elicit loyalty from those close to him. As for enmity, the true challenge of a ruler is in handling enemies and their betrayal. All three mentioned themes play out on a horizontal level amongst the narrative figures. This includes God who is also a narrative figure with a distinct personality, capacity and commanding desires despite His omnipotence.¹⁵ God as a narrative figure communicates on a horizontal level with a prophet. The same applies to lower creatures, such as talking birds, rebellious devils, serving *jinn* and angels. All are narrative figures and each embodies a social duty which the compiler of *qiṣaṣ* strives to communicate to his audience.

To consider the *qiṣaṣ* as mirrors of history and as advisory literature to the temporal leaders, through the social function of looking inwardly into a society in a Muslim milieu, poses two challenges. The first challenge is whether to situate the *qiṣaṣ*, within religious writing,¹⁶ or in the written corpus known in the classical age as *adab* (cultivated writing). In short, are the *qiṣaṣ* *adab*? This will be the subject matter of Chapter One. The second difficulty is to find a suitable generally accepted definition of the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*,³ pertaining to their social function as mirrors of history and their advisory function for rulers.

¹⁵ Boaz Shoshan *Poetics of Islamic historiography. Deconstructing Ṭabarī's History* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 97-99. He shows that the intervention of God in history is an active narrative figure and dominant in al-Ṭabarī's *History*.

¹⁶ In the medieval sense, the term *qiṣṣa* (a story) is not associated with popular narratives (like folktales) because popular stories were not esteemed in religious circles. In addition, the "*qiṣṣa*" is not found in the literary classification in Ibn Nadīm's *Fihrist* in the ninth century. The storyteller (*qaṣṣāṣ*) had the advantage of relaying stories based on Biblical sources and Israelite legends – hence the *qiṣṣa* was always a religious story, though popular. See Dwight Reynolds, "Popular prose in the post-classical period", in *Arabic literature in the post-classical period*, edited by Roger Allen and D.S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 252.

There are already a number of scholarly definitions of the *qışaş al-anbiyāʾ* in as far as they pertain to religious writing, none of which highlight the potential function of the advice the *qışaş* may offer to rulers. Some scholars define the *qışaş* as “legends of pre-Islamic prophets”,¹⁷ “tales about saints and prophets”,¹⁸ “moral tales”,¹⁹ “stories of the unseen”,²⁰ “religious literature of biblical prophets”,²¹ collection of prophetic legends,²² wealth of folklore in Islamic literature,²³ religious tales,²⁴ “*midrashic* tales”²⁵, and “succession of prophets.”²⁶ Some of these definitions do not correspond to one another (folklore is neither a legend nor a moral tale). It is true that each definition describes something about the Muslim writings of Biblical prophets in connection with other textual affinities such as exegeses and sacred scriptures, but the socio-political side of the *qışaş* is absent from all the above definitions. The scholarly emphasis has hitherto been largely on the religious flavour of the tales.

The aim in this thesis is to approach the *qışaş* as literature²⁷ with a social function of myth and with a potential to advise rulers in positions of leadership. The thesis is not intended to conduct a theological enquiry into the themes of the *qışaş*,

¹⁷ Tilman Nagel, “*Qışaş al-anbiyāʾ*,” in *EF*², volume 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 180.

¹⁸ Knappert, *Islamic legends*, volume 1, ix.

¹⁹ Knappert, *Islamic legends*, volume 1, 18.

²⁰ Uri Rubin, “Prophets and prophethood” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, edited by Andrew Rippin (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 234.

²¹ Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical prophets in the Qurʾān and Muslim literature* (Richmond Surrey: Curzon, 2002), 138.

²² Ján Pauliny, “Some remarks on the *Qışaş al-anbiyāʾ* works in Arabic literature”, in *The Qurʾān: formative interpretation*, edited by Andrew Rippin (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999), 313.

²³ Gustav Weil, *Biblical and extra-Biblical legends in Islamic folklore literature* (Walldorf-Hessen: Verlag fur Orientkunde, 1982), 46.

²⁴ Charles Pellat, “*Qışaş*”, in *EF*², volume 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 186.

²⁵ Gisela Webb, “Gabriel”, in the *EQ*, volume 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 279.

²⁶ Roberto Tottoli, “Narrative literature” in *The Blackwell Companion of the Qurʾān*, edited by Andrew Rippin (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 469.

²⁷ Marianna Klar is the first scholar to approach the *qışaş* thematically through the literary frameworks of crime and punishment, Oedipus’ complex and order and chaos. See her *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī’s Tales of the Prophets. Temptation, responsibility and loss* (London: Routledge, 2009), 16-24.

but rather to ask how the *qiṣaṣ* advise the rulers about leadership, friendship and enmity as a result of looking inside the society of the rulers. During this process we may get a better glimpse of the narrative models of prophets designed for temporal rulers, given their society in the reality of their cultures. Consequently, the *qiṣaṣ* could be understood as compendia of the accounts of the prophets which implicitly advise temporal Muslim rulers about the Muslim ideals of the expected conduct of leadership in their social contexts.

0.1.3 The two compilers

Compilers did more than collecting accounts of the prophets. They have contextualised the stories in an Islamic milieu through editing and adding some detail to suit the needs of their audience. In this way, each compiler has produced an original work and is part of the authorship of his final text. The first compiler under consideration in this thesis is Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923/310), originally from Āmul (Persia) whose scholarship includes exegesis (*tafsīr*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and historiography;²⁸ he had his limits also because none of his writing include or expand on philosophy, geography or natural sciences.²⁹ His extensive writings serve as models in the fields of Qurʾānic exegesis and historiography. The biographical dictionaries,³⁰ referred to in Chapter Two, affirm

²⁸ Ulrika Mårtensson, “Ṭabarī”, in *Makers of Islamic Civilization series* (Oxford centre for Islamic studies: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7-40. See also, C.E. Bosworth, “Al-Ṭabarī, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr b. Yazīd”, *EF*, volume 10, 11.

²⁹ Tarif Khālīdī, “Al-Ṭabarī: An introduction”, in *Al-Ṭabarī: A medieval Muslim historian and his work*, edited by Hugh Kennedy (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, Inc, 2008), 2.

³⁰ See the following biographical dictionaries: Yāqūt, *Dictionary of learned men*, volume 6 (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat hindiya bi-l muski, 1930), 432-433; Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā al-Shāfiʿiyya*, volume 3 (Aleppo: Maṭbaʿat ʿĪsa al-bābī al-ḥalabī wa-shurikaʾūhu, 1966), 120 -23; Ibn Khallikān, *Kitāb wafayāt al-aʿyān*, translated by MacGuckin de Slane, volume 1, originally printed in 1842 (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1961), 123. See also Franz Rosenthal, “The life and works of al-Ṭabarī”,

his scholarly influence on subsequent medieval Islamic writing; he was a *ḥadīth* collector and travelled extensively within the Islamic world during his youth for his formal education, to collect from other mentors all the traditional accounts of the *Sunna*. He had pupils of his own whom he taught in one of the mosques in Baghdād.

His first large work is his Qurʾānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) known as *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*; it interprets the entire Qurʾān, verse by verse, with an aim of clarifying specific Arabic words. He wrote as a believer but also as an expert on grammar. Al-Ṭabarī's *al-Taʾrīkh (History)* is an equally important piece of scholarship, in juxtaposition to his *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, as it portrays history starting with God's creation of the universe, the Biblical Patriarchs of Israel, the Biblical prophets, the Arab prophets including the Prophet Muḥammad, the Companions of the Prophets and all the caliphs up to the period of al-Ṭabarī. So it covers the first three centuries of Islam. His *History* is largely based on the narrative units of the *ḥadīth* and *khbar* (reported units of information).³¹ Clearly, this written work is religious history in content and orientation, and it serves as al-Ṭabarī's outlook on the history of prophets and Muslim leadership as seen through his transmitted sources. Some of these sources contradict one another which suggest that history is to be understood through different opinions. His *History* offers different views (*akhbār*, pl. of *khbar*) for the same event; and the arrangement of these reports reveals the intended message of the historian.³² With the diversity of views, al-Ṭabarī seems to view world history as occurring under God's rule and with values to be implemented by

in *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, volume 1, translated by Franz Rosenthal (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 1-40.

³¹ Khālīdī, "Al-Ṭabarī", 7.

³² Ulrika Mårtensson, "Discourse and historical analysis: the case of al-Ṭabarī's History of the messengers and the kings", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 16:3 (2005), 297.

worldly Muslim rulers. The moral paradigm³³ which he promotes in his Qurʾānic commentary is taken for granted in his *History*. The latter does not offer original morality but shows how morality or lack of it has affected the lives of leaders.

The *History* was not written to give historical detail of what had happened in the past, as one may expect from a modern historian; rather it was written in the narrative form to draw out meaning from the past.³⁴ For example, al-Ṭabarī might have viewed history as divided between those who obeyed God versus those who did not. His narrative then illustrates the consequences of obedience and disobedience of God by prophets and Muslim leaders. The fact that *History* has such an open scope on the views of world leaders is the primary reason for choosing and studying its advisory nature concerning the prophets Joseph, David and Solomon.

The second compiler for consideration in this thesis is Abū Ishāq Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī (d. 1035/426). He was of Persian origin from the eastern city of Nīshāpūr in the province of Khurāsān in the tenth and eleventh century.³⁵ Little is known about the life of this scholar from the biographical dictionaries, but his context and influences are discussed in Chapter Two. He is known for his two books which have survived: *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (*Tales of the Prophets*) and his exegetical work *al-Kashf wa-l bayān*.³⁶ He seems to have been influenced by al-Ṭabarī's interests in prophets and creation, but he was

³³ The main focus is to situate Islamic history in a larger context than Biblical and Persian tradition. Håkan Rydving, "Introduction", in *Al-Ṭabarī's History: interpretation and challenges*, edited by Håkan Rydving (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Historia Religionum 27, 2007), 11.

³⁴ Göran Larsson, "Al-Ṭabarī on history and knowledge" in *Al-Ṭabarī's History: interpretation and challenges*, edited by Håkan Rydving (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Historia Religionum 27, 2007), 18-19.

³⁵ Andrew Rippin, "Al-Thaʿlabī, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Abū Ishāq al-Nīsābūrī", in *EF*, volume 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 534.

³⁶ His *Kashf* in comparison to al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmiʿ* is more concise because it drops some of the *isnāds* while keeping the content uncompromised. See Walid Saleh, "Hermeneutics: al-Thaʿlabī", in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, edited by Andre Rippin (United Kingdom: The Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009), 324.

also innovative in his exegetical work; he was a well sought-after scholar in Nishāpūr. His work on the tales of the prophets stands out as a model of compilation for future works. They are also original because al-Thaʿlabī has included material and sources which other scholars did not have in their works. His narrative detail of the prophets is more descriptive and with imaginative richness. Therefore, the ʿArāʾis are selected for these two reasons: their model-character and narrative detail.

Al-Thaʿlabī re-arranges some of al-Ṭabarī's narrative detail about the prophets, eliminates repetitive *ḥadīth* accounts and concentrates on the content of the prophetic tales rather than their sources. Through his editorial work and his own research on the sources of the narrative accounts, he has produced an original work of the prophets. These narrative differences in *al-Taʾrīkh* and ʿArāʾis are a crucial part of this study because they reflect the historical contexts of the compilers and their cultural priorities at the time when Sunnism was not unanimously formed and agreed upon by Muslim traditionalists in the empire. In Chapter Two, details of our two compilers and their contexts will be given.

0.2 Methodology

The approach to the tales of the prophets is two-fold: text and context. The text portion of the methodology concentrates on the tales of the three prophets who are Joseph, David and his son Solomon as presented to the reader in the writing of al-Ṭabarī's *Taʾrīkh al-umam wa-l mulūk* (*History of the nations and kings*) and that of al-Thaʿlabī's ʿArāʾis *al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (*Tales of the Prophets*). Although al-Thaʿlabī's ʿArāʾis is of exegetical genre, it is not devoid of historical information about al-Thaʿlabī's time and place in Nishāpūr. Therefore there is textual affinity

between the two works, not only because they portray the same Biblical figures, Patriarchs of ancient Israel, but they also reveal the contextual side of the two compilers, their intentions and the spiritual needs of the audience they address. Therefore there is historical significance to these texts which will be discussed below in terms of the historical knowledge they convey.

The *qiṣaṣ* can be read as counsel narratives to the temporal rulers (caliphs, *amīrs*, *sulṭāns*) through the examples of the prophets; there are two selected works from the mainstream advisory literature which can be used as the framework of approach to the *qiṣaṣ*. These texts are *al-Adab al-kabīr* of Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] (d. 757/139) and the *Qābūs-nāma* (*A Mirror for Princes*) by Kay Kā'ūs (d. 1084 / 476). These two books are written instructions to aid rulers in the art of governing, and they are selected for the following reason. Both were written during the °Abbāsid period; *al-Adab al-kabīr* first appeared when Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] was a court secretary under Caliph al-Manṣūr who built the city of Baghdād with all its propaganda symbols serving the profile of the caliph as a world leader and conqueror. *Al-Adab al-kabīr* is a manual which includes thoughts from the Persian and Hellenistic cultures as to how to run a court with political integrity. By the time the city of Baghdād was first built from 764-67/146-150,³⁷ the Islamic polity had shifted from a tribal setting to an urban one and early Muslims took pre-Islamic political thought and ways of proceeding into consideration; consequently, *al-Adab al-kabīr* was written to help rulers appropriate them at the time the caliphate was in its golden era.

The other advisory book of consideration is Kay Kā'ūs' *Qābūs-nāma*, an eleventh-century manual to advise the sulṭāns during the later time of the °Abbāsid

³⁷ See A.A. Duri, "Baghdād", in *ET*², volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 894. However, al-Ṭabarī's Baghdād was larger than at the time of Caliph al-Manṣūr.

dynasty – the caliphate was already nominal. The author lived in the eleventh century in the region of Gurgān, in the north west of Persia under the Ziyārid Shīʿī dynasty. His book was intended for his son, Gīlān Shāh (d.1090/483), who was the last member of the Ziyārids to assume power.³⁸

Both of these manuals offer advice to the rulers on a variety of subjects from which I am selecting three thematic subjects for this thesis: leadership, friendship and enmity. The main approach of this thesis is to read the *qiṣaṣ* as advisory texts in narrative form on themes which are already known in the larger advice literature or *Mirrors for Princes*. The selected *qiṣaṣ* are not *per se* *Mirrors for Princes* in literary form and direct instruction, nor likely considered court literature since both al-Ṭabarī³⁹ and al-Thaʿlabī did not live in a ruler’s court when they wrote major works. My pre-supposition is that the *qiṣaṣ* could serve as advice to the rulers and to educate the public what is expected from the caliphs in power, based on the models of the pre-Islamic prophets.

How did the rulers know or understand the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* as advice literature about their sovereignty? In general, the relationship between rulers and *ʿulamāʾ* is not always clear from the available sources during the ninth century. Zamān has argued that the relations between them were not problematic, even during the *Miḥna* between 833/218 and 849/234 because Caliph al-Maʾmūn was testing the credibility of the *ʿulamāʾ*’s authority as opposed to nullifying it. Similarly, the

³⁸ See “Introduction” in *the Qābūs-nāma*, translated by Reuben Levy (London: The Cresset Press Ltd., 1951), ix.

³⁹ This does not mean that al-Ṭabarī had no contacts with the appointed nobility, or even meeting the caliph on certain occasions. He even witnessed and participated in debates with the hard-line Sunnī Ḥanbalīs in Baghdād who were close to the caliphs. He also served the vizier without accepting payments or favours which suggests that he was not *per se* an employee in the caliph’s court. See Claude Gilliot, “La Formation Intellectuelle de Ṭabarī”, in *Journal Asiatique*, no. 3-4, volume 276 (1988): 233. As for al-Thaʿlabī, we have no biographical detail about his possible contacts with the ruling class in Khurāsān.

‘*ulamā*’ were not fighting for independence from the rulers nor were they allowed to become an independent and popular force.⁴⁰ However, those who were independent⁴¹ were not necessarily in opposition to the caliphs, even if they affronted their rulers for their lack of morality, especially when people looked up to such scholars for guidance and advice. The caliphs would have received advice from such scholars as long as it improved the rulers’ public image.⁴² But the caliph remained the guardian of his *umma* and his relations with the ‘*ulamā*’ remained one of collaboration even after the *Miḥna* was over⁴³, and the caliph was a member of the scholarly circles because he remained the one to decide, when in doubt by the ‘*ulamā*’, what is normative *sunna*.⁴⁴ In such a scenario, during the ninth century it seems that caliph and his ‘*ulamā*’ were capable of engaging in receiving good advice, especially when it promoted the profile of a ruler.

In addition, the rulers must have also known the tales of the prophets from the weekly preaching by pious figures who had recourse to the tales as part of preparing their sermons. Preachers and storytellers often experienced problematic tension with rulers and most preachers were connected to political rulers.⁴⁵ But some preachers stood against worldly success, wealth and power and have used preaching as a religious channel of criticism against political rulers.⁴⁶ Such preachers were quite brave and took upon themselves life-threatening risks but they were influential with some rulers who shed tears upon hearing their sermons. For example, Manṣūr b.

⁴⁰ Muḥammad Qāsim Zamān, *Religion and politics under the early ‘Abbāsids*, 81.

⁴¹ Some scholars were financially independent and were not in need of a ruler’s patronage.

⁴² Zamān, *Religion*, 81.

⁴³ During the early ‘Abbāsid reign, the ‘*ulamā*’ were not of powerful social status because their posts were appointed by the rulers. Hence many of the scholars did not deliberately upset the rulers lest they lose important appointment; this attitude led to the *Miḥna* (833-849/218-234). See Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Political Thought*, 73.

⁴⁴ Zamān, *Religion*, 83.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Berkey, *Popular preaching and religious authority in the medieval Islamic Near East*, 58.

⁴⁶ Berkey, *Popular*, n.32, 114.

°Ammār (d. 825/209), a celebrated Baghdādī preacher, preached before Caliph Hārūn, and was capable of moving the high and the mighty to weeping.⁴⁷ Over a century later, the Ḥanbalī preacher, Ibn Sam°ūn (d. 997/387) preached before the Būyid ruler °Aḏūd al-Dawla (d.983/ 372) and the Caliph al-Ṭā°i° (d.1003/393) and was capable of moving the sovereign to tears.⁴⁸ Such examples lend credibility to the supposition that spiritual preaching and the moral exhortation of the ancient prophets (*al-anbiyā°*) whose stories were possibly included in sermons to advise the current rulers about past heroes whose political and moral aspirations would have improved their own public image.

Historical knowledge within the Islamic tradition is a major issue among scholars. The study of medieval Islamic historiography has been as important as that of the *ḥadīth* corpus which has been the background literature of most religious writing on subjects such as the *fiqh*, *tafsīr*, biographical dictionaries, historiography and other related epistles or commentaries. All these genres constitute the classical Islamic tradition. The study of tradition has encompassed two concerns; first, the study of transmission of the collected sources of the tradition and, second, the study of its content in terms of narrative detail and structure.

Recent scholars have worked on literary criticism despite the inconsistencies in the narrative detail found in medieval Islamic religious corpus. Noth, for example, performed the task of examining source-criticism in Islamic historiography. He found⁴⁹ that previous scholars (Rosenthal, Abbot, Duri and Sezgin) had concentrated on the veracity of transmission as opposed to the information about the tradition

⁴⁷ Merlin Swartz, *Ibn al-Jawzī, Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-l mudhakkīrīn*, 165. See also Berkey, *Popular*, 60.

⁴⁸ Berkey, *Popular*, 60-61.

⁴⁹ Albrecht Noth, *The early Arabic historical tradition* (Princeton, NJ: the Darwin Press, Inc., 1994), 2.

contained in the transmission. Another group of scholars (de Goeje, Wellhausen, Mednikov and Caetani) collected sources in thematic categories (for example, sources which transmit narrative detail of the early Islamic conquests) under named schools (the Iraqī or Medinan school) whilst Noth warns against the assumption that any one regional school contains all the historical knowledge of a tradition unless all sources of this tradition are brought into scholarly examination. One school does not contain all sources of a tradition (eg. in the case of *al-ridda*). In addition, Noth is highly suspicious of the authenticity of the historical knowledge contained in the transmission. He thinks that there is more fiction attached to the written tradition than factual history. So he does not construct historical truth from the textual narrative of early Islamic historiography. Part of his criticism against such scholarship argues that early Islamic tradition contains varieties of concepts of history, contradictions, and narrative details which seem to be at odds with one another.⁵⁰ There is no uniformity of opinion on a variety of subjects in the tradition. So he proposes a study of the literary report-unit (*khabar*) which includes literary forms, “topoi” (literary devices which give narrative details of a specific situation, like personal names or the glorification of the past) and schema (such as the use of paradigms) in the early Islamic tradition.

Khālidī criticises Noth for not situating the topoi⁵¹ in the proper and larger theoretical framework, since he was not the first one to make use of them, though Khālidī acknowledges that Noth paves a new path of investigating Islamic sources to question the historical truth in the transmitted tradition. However, in reading Noth’s

⁵⁰ Noth, *The early Arabic* 85-87 & 140.

⁵¹ Tarif Khālidī, *Arabic historical thought in the classical period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), n.13, 16.

book, it seems to me that he does not differentiate between historical truth in narrative detail and historical reference found in mythical detail. Historical 'truth' is derived from historical 'facts'. Historical 'reality' is attained but also by myth, metaphor and symbolism. It seems that Noth should have expanded the notion of historical knowledge of the tradition to include not the historical facts alone but also the historical condition under which a compiler operated. After all, the early medieval Muslim historians were not recording facts but making sense of the past in light of the advent of Islam.

Making sense of the past seems to be the overall point of el-Hibrī's thoughts on early Islamic writing. He argues that by the time of al-Ṭabarī in the late ninth/third century, there was already a religious ideology in formation (Sunnism) and Islamic historiography was more a commentary⁵² on the past than reporting factual events and it consisted of literary layers of meaning; one literary layer of al-Ṭabarī's *History* is implicit accusation against pro-ʿAlid sentiments⁵³ while another layer reveals a constant suspicion between caliphs and their viziers. However, el-Hibrī maintains that these narrative accounts about the caliphs were not originally read to discover facts but for their 'allusive power'. However, it is hardly reasonable to agree that such narrative detail was all written to cause an 'allusive power'.⁵⁴ In his other book, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: the Rāshīdūn Caliphs*, el-Hibrī points out that the literary structure of the accounts of the first four caliphs

⁵² Tayeb el-Hibrī, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1999), 13. It is debatable how much these narrative accounts are in fact commentaries on facts, but at least el-Hibrī's idea and approach open a new door into the literary narratives of early Islamic tradition which remains in need of decoding. See the book review by Paul Cobb in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, volume 121, no 1, January-March (2001): 109-110.

⁵³ El-Hibrī, *Reinterpreting*, 47-48.

⁵⁴ See the book review by Gavin Picken, *British Journal of Middle Eastern studies*, volume 28, 2 (2001): 236.

follows Biblical paradigms to show continuity between the Patriarchs of ancient Israel and the Muslim caliphs.⁵⁵ This continuity is essential to this thesis, for it assumes that those Patriarchs were viewed as models for the caliphs to emulate; in short they (Patriarchs and Prophets) serve as advice models for the caliphs during periods of crisis.

A new reading of the history of the Rāshīdūn entails approaching Qurʾānic exegesis and the *ḥadīth* as items of historical significance, which most historians according to el-Hibrī have not done, especially since the history of the Rāshīdūn, written during the ʿAbbāsīd period, can be read as reflecting ʿAbbāsīd conventional wisdom in its assessment of the past.⁵⁶ He does not agree with modern historians who emphasise the biases of sources in the chronicles because biases can be found across different accounts of different genres. Instead, el-Hibrī proposes to read the text to inter-connect the context of the author with the context of the period he writes on.⁵⁷ In other words, writing about the Rāshīdūn during the late ninth century says something about the ʿAbbāsīd period as well as the hidden agenda of the author which is connected to his time, place and his sense of history.

This brings us to the role of context in the methodology. The context entails two perspectives, one from the political centre of the caliphate, Baghdād of the late ninth/third and early tenth/fourth centuries when and where al-Ṭabarī lived, and the other from the provincial regions (in Iran) located on the edge of the eastern side of the Islamic world in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The centre versus the edge is the contextual side of the methodology.

⁵⁵ Tayeb el-Hibrī- *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: the Rāshīdūn Caliphs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 12.

⁵⁶ El-Hibrī, *Parable*, 19.

⁵⁷ El-Hibrī, *Parable*, 20.

Bulliet argues that Islamic history has been largely written, read and interpreted from the perspective of the centre (the political power of the caliphate) given the importance of the political leadership of the Prophet Muḥammad and his immediate successors. The major cities which were viewed in terms of political significance in different periods were Medina, Damascus, Baghdād, Fustāt, Cordoba, and to some extent Kūfa and Baṣra. However, as Islam spread well beyond the Arabian Peninsula, many non-Arabs have embraced Islam as their new religion and articulated their new faith in Arabic but through their regional contexts. There are several edges to Islam but Bulliet refers to the Iranian edge in particular. The edges were provincial territories with their local historical and cultural contexts and their religious scholars worked towards harmonising their opinions about the tradition for the rest of the Islamic world.

Bulliet's understanding of an edge can be summarised in the following:⁵⁸ an edge was not a centre-location of the caliphal power, but a geographical distance from a central authority; an edge emerged because of conversion of non-Arabs to Islam and their *‘ulamā’* laboured to form the Islamic tradition, even though their ideas lacked uniformity through the Islamic world in medieval times; an edge had a local culture which strove to be in unity with the rest of the *umma*. It flourished in importance through conversion to Islam and was followed by increased urbanisation in Iran which fostered a social class of rising religious elites. Eventually, an edge managed to develop its own centre (had its own city of significance where a local ruler assumed his power).

⁵⁸ Richard Bulliet, *Islam. The view from the edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 8-11.

Bulliet's hypothesis of the edge is not perfect. His over-emphasis on the role of the *'ulamā'* and their positive contribution for the rest of Muslim world is contrasted in a later chapter of his book when he links recent Muslim conservatism to the influence of the *'ulamā'* who are oriented to purifying the religious praxis.⁵⁹ On the one hand, the author makes a solid contribution to the study of Islamic history and enhances further the contextual side of a given text; but, on the other hand, his idea that an edge had its established authority of the *'ulamā'* who were an elite social class with a developed scholarship is too polarised, especially given the role of the *ḥadīth* sources which were already in circulation among the different cities across the Islamic empire.⁶⁰ Therefore an edge and a centre shared common *ḥadīth* sources as opposed to possessing only independent *ḥadīth* collections; besides, although the *madrasa* institution of learning *fiqh* started on the Iranian edge before it spread to the centre, their staff of teachers were not all the citizens of edge territories, which suggests that the development of religious authority between the centre and the edge was not necessarily independent from one another.⁶¹ This is true as regards the Islamic religious dimension. However, from the political viewpoint of the Islamic world in the tenth/fourth and eleventh/fifth centuries, there was more independence between the centre, where the caliph was situated, and the edge where appointed rulers were running the political management of their regions. The political reality of medieval Islam reveals the multi-cultural imprints of the medieval Islamic world, when there were political centres and regional provinces in the vast areas of early

⁵⁹ Bulliet, *Islam. The view*, 191-92.

⁶⁰ See a book review by Fred Donner, *Speculum*, no.70, iii (1995): 593.

⁶¹ See a book review by Gauthier H.A Juynboll, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, volume 115 (3), 1995: 484.

Islamic conquests. All in all, Bulliet's categorisation of contrasting perspectives between an edge and those of the centre is still valid.

To summarise, the methodology of this thesis entails a reading of primary texts with historical significance, on the assumption that a text reflects a historical reality even if it does not provide all the historical facts about the compiler's context; this is one of my previous points with respect to the use of myths as a historical reflection of an author's living community. These narrative stories of the prophets may advise the rulers, and the thematic subjects of the thesis are borrowed from the larger advice literature of Ibn al-Muqaffa^c and Kay Kā'ūs. The themes of leadership, friendship and enmity will be examined through the narratives of the aforementioned three prophets as historical perspectives from a centre of caliphal power (Baghdād) and an edge of regional city (Nīshāpūr).

0.2.1 Literature review

What do scholars say about the *qiṣaṣ* and the social functions of these tales? There are different perspectives and approaches in the scholarship of the *qiṣaṣ* arising from the narrative translations into English and the academic studies of the sources behind the tales.

One classical approach has been to explore the Jewish background of the *qiṣaṣ* through the Biblical texts and Jewish sources (like the *Midrash*). Sidersky takes such an approach and he claims that commentators of the Qur'ān have drawn many of their sources from the Jewish tradition.⁶² He tasks himself to pinpoint the rabbinic, *midrashic* and New Testament sources of the Qur'ānic accounts. He selects the story

⁶² David Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes Musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des prophètes* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1933), 1.

of Joseph and compares it with the *Sūrat Yūsuf* and its counterpart account in the book of Genesis; this is a simplistic approach because it is neither synthetical nor analytical of the sources at hand. He wants to highlight the Jewish sources of the *qiṣaṣ* rather than to consider the Muslim contexts of the tales. This opens up the inter-textual relationship between the two religions but Sidersky's book takes no account of a Muslim context to approach the *qiṣaṣ*. His overall view of the *qiṣaṣ* is *midrashic* at best.

The scholarly silence regarding the Muslim context is not long observed because the cultivation of the Islamic characteristic is picked up by Merlin Swartz's assessment of W.M. Thackston, Jr's translation of al-Kisāʿī's *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*.⁶³ Swartz brings out the two stages of cultivation by the Qurʾānic exegetes and by the Ṣūfīs who were oriented towards story-telling and preaching.⁶⁴ Because the sources behind al-Kisāʿī were as many as sixty-five different manuscript copies, Swartz claims that the *qiṣaṣ* already had a social function to shape public Muslim piety; the manuscript copies indicate that the *qiṣaṣ* have gone beyond the religious milieu by popularising the tales. The connection between the entertaining function of the tales and the moralising of the prophetic figures has clearer focus in Ján Knappert's *Islamic legends*; these are a serious collection of the popular narratives of prophets and saints throughout Islamic cultures, including South Asian and Swahili narratives. Knappert has shown the power of the story-based narrative in the process of cultural assimilation with a universal appeal in Muslim contexts. The two volume-books suggest that once religious narratives are popularised, they become assimilated and expressed in different cultures. The universality of the *qiṣaṣ* does not suggest to

⁶³ Al-Kisāʿī was a Persian author but details of his life escape the biographical dictionaries.

⁶⁴ Merlin Swartz, "Tales of the prophets of al-Kisāʿī", in *The Muslim World*, 72(1), 1982:55.

the author that all the selected prophets are canonical by the tradition, except for Abraham, Moses, Noah, and Jesus who presumably have delivered the Islamic message; consequently, the Prophet Muḥammad neither had to teach a new message nor was his advent a major surprise.⁶⁵ Knappert keeps the centrality of the Prophet Muḥammad who serves both as the background and the purpose of the tales; these tales are defined by the author as legends and folklore necessary for the transmission of faith.

The cultural presentation of the *qīṣaṣ* has its problem in terms of urban prejudice as James Lindsay argues in his article “‘Alī Ibn ‘Asākir as a preserver of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*: the case of David bin Jesse.”⁶⁶ The text at hand is the biographical dictionary, *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq (TMD)* in which the story of David is twisted to show only his good moral side while his immorality is silently ignored; Lindsay points to the politics of writing to attribute only the positive moral side of the prophet David to make him a suitable citizen of Dimashq; clearly, the historiography of Ibn ‘Asākir serves as a piece of political propaganda of Damascus at the expense of the entire truth of the story of David. Lindsay in comparison shows that the accounts of David in the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* are more comprehensive to include the immoral side of David. However, Lindsay’s approach to the story of David in the *TMD* does not discuss David’s political side in the narrative.

Even though Lindsay is explicit about the political nuances of the *qīṣaṣ* to suit the historiography of Muslim cities, however, he stands alone in his perspective of the *qīṣaṣ*. There exists a larger group of scholars who regard the *qīṣaṣ* mainly as

⁶⁵ Knappert, *Islamic legends*, volume 1, 2.

⁶⁶ James E. Lindsay, “‘Alī Ibn ‘Asākir as preserver of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*: the case of David b. Jesse,” *Studia Islamica* 82 (1985): 45-82.

religious genre and prophetic history; such scholars include Ján Pauliny, Roberto Tottoli and Brannon Wheeler.

Ján Pauliny⁶⁷ views the *qiṣaṣ* as prophetic legends in Arabic despite the difficulty of tracing the real origins of the *qiṣaṣ* in Muslim contexts; he regards the *qiṣaṣ* by al-Thaʿlabī and al-Kisāʾī as paramount compilations of legends because of their authors' exegetical and mythical approaches. He argues that the *qiṣaṣ* are religious because they are linked to the theology of prophets.⁶⁸ This seems overly focussed as if the *qiṣaṣ* say nothing else. A range of narrative issues of the *qiṣaṣ* are not considered in Pauliny's article; yet he rightly holds the view that the exegetical narratives of the *qiṣaṣ* are better organised than the *qiṣaṣ* in the Qurʾān which preserve the moral lessons of prophets. This means that the *qiṣaṣ* convey knowledge in an orderly fashion and chronologically to complement the Qurʾānic outlines regarding the prophets.

Though Tottoli⁶⁹ claims that the *qiṣaṣ* remain religious because they belong to the genres of exegesis and historiography, he takes a historical approach to the sources of the tales.⁷⁰ Initially he looks at the significance of the early sources of the *qiṣaṣ* given by Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 725/106), Ishāq ibn Bashīr (d. 821/205) and ʿUmāra ibn Wathīma (d. 902/289); all are quoted in al-Thaʿlabī's *ʿArāʾis*. Then he gives a survey of all the *qiṣaṣ* books written up to the twentieth century. They are

⁶⁷ Ján Pauliny, "Some remarks on the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* works in Arabic literature", in *The Qurʾān: Formative interpretation*, edited by Andrew Rippin (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999), 313-326.

⁶⁸ Pauliny, "Some remarks", 313.

⁶⁹ Roberto Tottoli's main work on the collection of the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* of al-Ṭarafī, an Andalusian exegete who depended on al-Ṭabarī's exegesis as the main source for his tales about the prophets. Tottoli gives an extant exposition of the sources of al-Ṭarafī's *qiṣaṣ*, al-Ṭarafī's life, structure and contents of his collections.

⁷⁰ R. Tottoli, *Biblical prophets in the Qurʾān and Muslim literature* (Richmond Surrey: Curzon, 2002), 138. See also Al-Ṭarafī, *The stories of the prophets by Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī*, edited and translated by R. Tottoli (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2003).

different *qiṣaṣ*, Tottoli claims, because of the different sources each compiler has used. The historicity of sources determines the nuances of the narrative tales to suit the needs of different audiences. His focus on the sources of the *qiṣaṣ* is also implied in his “Narrative literature,”⁷¹ where he claims that the Qurʾānic and non-Qurʾānic sources represent prophetic history. However, he thinks that the non-Qurʾānic sources are used under the authority of the Qurʾān.

The historicity of sources is also in the works of the Qurʾānic scholar, Brannon Wheeler. Two of his books directly relate to the sources of the *qiṣaṣ* from the Qurʾān and extra-Qurʾānic materials which include the Biblical and Jewish sources, all of which were extant and available for the exegetes. From this he infers that the Qurʾān including its accounts of the prophets did not emerge out of a cultural vacuum, but rather it represents a continuation of late antique culture. Hence the exegetical literature has preserved encyclopaedic information of extra-Qurʾānic sources which preceded the advent of Arab Islam.⁷² He takes this idea into his next book, *Moses in the Qurʾān and the Islamic Exegesis*, in which he shows that the Qurʾānic exegetes had access to sources beyond the Qurʾānic texts from which to draw images of Moses which contrast the images from the Biblical and Jewish sources; Wheeler concludes that in these exegetical efforts, the exegetes highlight the legitimacy of the Prophet Muḥammad in the history of prophecy. They try to show that Muḥammad is a superior prophet to Moses. For example, in the story of Moses at the water of Midian (Q28:21-28), the exegetes use extra-Qurʾānic sources to draw an image of Moses only as a miniature epitome of the Israelites, while Abraham at

⁷¹ Tottoli, “Narrative literature”, 469.

⁷² Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Qurʾān. An introduction to the Qurʾān and the Muslim exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002), 9. This book serves as a resource of quotes from the Qurʾān and its related exegetical literature specific to the prophets.

Mecca is the forerunner of Muḥammad.⁷³ Later in the book, Wheeler mentions that the exegetes of Muḥammad's mystical journey from Jerusalem to the seventh heaven had set the prophetic pedestal of the Prophet higher than that of Moses; this is because the latter did not even enter Jerusalem.⁷⁴

Finally, with the latest book on al-Tha'labī's *ʿArāʾis*, Marianna Klar's *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's Tales of the Prophets* offers a new reading of the tales of the prophets through western categories of 'Crime and Punishment', 'Oedipus' including the Freudian Oedipal complex, and 'Chaos and Order'. She selects four prophets from a group of forty-six in al-Tha'labī's book; they are: Noah, Saul, David and Job. Crime and punishment seems the most religious approach within three categories, since it reflects the relations between prophets and God who opposes the sins of the prophets and inflicts dire consequences. These categories demonstrate the relational difficulties in the lives of the prophets in al-Tha'labī's narratives: their sins or crime, father-son rivalry in the management of their kingdoms, and the prophets' responsibilities for causing chaos or maintaining order over their lives and their states of governing. Her book offers three perspectives of the prophetic struggles: personal, psychological and social; they are non-religious approaches to the *qiṣaṣ* which can be read anew through the theoretical lens of social sciences.

After an exposition of the intellectual make-up of al-Tha'labī⁷⁵ and the major sources of the *qiṣaṣ* in religious, biographical dictionaries and historiographies, her section on methodology and patterns is most intriguing. On the one hand, Klar seems to draw contrasting ideas from Freud and Erich Fromm with respect to Oedipus:

⁷³ B. M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Qurʾān and the Islamic exegesis* (Oxford: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 63.

⁷⁴ Wheeler, *Moses in the Qurʾān*, 117.

⁷⁵ Klar offers textual nuances as she compares al-Tha'labī's text of the four selected prophets with other exegetical, biographical and historiographical texts.

sexual desire as opposed to political ambition to explain the rivalry relation between father and son in the *qiṣaṣ*.⁷⁶ She does the same with scapegoat ideas from René Girard and Hyam Maccoby with respect to “sacrifices” which serve either to defuse social crisis (Girard) or to give birth to a new society (Maccoby), to explain the difficulties of social change before the immutable law.⁷⁷

On the other hand, Klar’s approach in reading al-Thaʿlabī’s *qiṣaṣ* is largely based on western theories applied to an eastern text from Khurāsān. These theories are a mixture of social, psychological and classical literary theories without explaining the common ground between them. Besides, they do not add to the cultural understanding of the city of Nīshāpūr at the time of al-Thaʿlabī. Her citations of the primary sources for each of the four prophets are too detailed and hard to follow in the makeup of the overall picture of each prophetic figure. There is a lot of inter-textual analysis in her book. For example, she gives a long six pages of sources about Noah⁷⁸ and she even counts the number of words dedicated to Noah by each source. Such information is rather cumbersome to draw clear pictures from the tradition about one prophet.

Her work, however, intends to penetrate the personal makeup of the narrative prophets of the *qiṣaṣ*, more a psychological and social portrayal than a cultural study of the Nīshāpūran society in the eleventh century. It seems that Klar understands the *qiṣaṣ* as legends of prophets with psychological realities to explain prophetic conduct. Hence the tales function to justify, not necessarily uphold, why prophets struggle in their prophetic missions.

⁷⁶ Klar, *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī’s*, 19-21.

⁷⁷ Klar, *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī’s*, 23-24

⁷⁸ Klar, *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī’s*, 142-148.

Overall, what seem prevalent in the scholarly literature regarding the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*⁷⁹ are the different readings of these tales through either: the study of sources, or Muslim contextualisation of the narratives or some theories of psychological and social power. The social functions of the tales range from organising the knowledge of the prophets (chronologically) and influencing the Muslim popular piety among the faithful; ultimately, the legitimacy of the Prophet Muḥammad is upheld through these tales of ancient prophets.

0.2.2 The primary sources

The primary sources used in this study are found in Arabic or Persian literature. They include advisory literature, historiography, exegesis and biographical dictionaries. As mentioned under the methodology section, the framework of approach to the *qīṣaṣ* is borrowed from two primary sources of the advisory literature, namely, the *al-Adab al-kabīr* and the *Qābūs-nāma* (*Mirrors for princes*). They are not the only advisory literature in medieval Islamic writing,⁷⁹ for example Niẓām al-Mulk who was a successful vizier during the Seljūk period wrote to the same effect, *Sīyāsat-nāma* (*Siyar al-mulūk*) in 1091/484. His advice is delivered through historical anecdotes in fifty chapters.⁸⁰

Ibn al-Muqaffa^c's *al-Adab al-kabīr* complements his *Risāla fī-l ṣaḥāba*⁸¹ which is an epistle advising the ^cAbbāsīd ruler, the caliph al-Manṣūr (d. 775/158), on choosing executive companions, military personnel and maintaining a *just* authority.

⁷⁹ For a survey of advice manuals in Arabic and Persian literature, see C.E. Bosworth, "Nāṣiḥat al-Mulūk", *ET*², volume 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 984.

⁸⁰ For more details, see H. Bowen and C.E. Bosworth, "Niẓām al-Mulk, Abū ^cAlī al-Ḥasan b. ^cAlī b. Ishāq al-Ṭūsī", in *ET*², volume 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 69.

⁸¹ This epistle does not belong to the genre of the *Mirrors for princes* because it is too specific to a historical context. *Mirrors* are usually more wisdom-related and open-ended to other situations. See P. Crone *Medieval Islamic political thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 151.

Al-Adab al-kabīr is divided into different sections: in the first section (*al-Adab al-ṣaghīr*), a collection of wisdom sayings, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c highlights the social function of *adab* and the formation of sound mind among the youth; in sections two and three, he promotes *adab*⁸² (social etiquette) praxis for political leaders. The fourth section is intended for the general audience highlighting friendships among those in the caliph's court. Ibn al-Muqaffa^c views *adab* as the social norm that underlines personal and political relations. He makes friendship a by-product of *adab*, while enmity is a by-product of hostility and superficial praxis of friendliness.

This suggests to the reader of *al-Adab al-kabīr* that the leadership of a caliph is measured by his friendship or enmity. This is one reason to select Ibn al-Muqaffa^c and his thoughts on leadership, friendship and enmity in order to have a fresh reading of the *qiṣaṣ* through the political advisory lens already known in the tradition. A second reason is the historical period when *al-Adab al-kabīr* was written; it was when the empire was starting to define its symbol of power by having a newly built Muslim capital, Baghdād, where the golden age of the caliphate was starting by the late eighth to early ninth century.

Kay Kā'ūs⁸³ *Qābūs-nāma* was written in 1084 at the end of the Ziyārid dynasty who ruled the province of Gurgān in the south-eastern region coast of the Caspian Sea. It is a region in Persia which was last to embrace Islam and some members of the Ziyārids were not in fact Muslims.⁸⁴ The ruling family were cruel slave owners to the point that some of them had met their deaths at the hands of their

⁸² There is a dual meaning to *adab*: social manner/etiquette or written literature.

⁸³ His full name is Kay Kā'ūs ibn Iskandar ibn Qābūs ibn Washmgīr; his *Qābūs-nāma* was written for his son who was a man of letters but a cruel warrior. Kay Kā'ūs is the grandson of the highly venerated Qābūs. Qābūs was so very suspicious of his bodyguards that he put them, one by one, to death. See the "Introduction" by Reuben Levy in *Qābūs*, x.

⁸⁴ Levy's "Introduction" in *Qābūs*, xii.

slaves.⁸⁵ Shedding blood was a common measure to protect the welfare of the region or state. Trust was a hard currency among the rulers of the Ziyārid dynasty.

Qābūs-nāma covers a range of topics on *adab*, enjoyment of life, economic advice, management of animals, sports, acquisition of slaves and cattle, punishments and war, fighting battles, companionship, enmity, kingship and knighthood. The book cautions however against trust in friendships and suggests that friendship is not necessarily the answer to all political challenges. This is not a surprising fact because *Qābūs-nāma* appeared at the time the caliphal power was diminished by the end of the eleventh century, unlike the timing of *al-Adab al-kabīr*. Hence there are two primary reasons to select *Qābūs-nāma* as a piece of advice literature which contracts with *al-Adab al-kabīr*. First, it adds to the understanding of friendship and enmity during mistrusting times for a leader; and second, *Qābūs-nāma* was written at a time of a failing caliphate power, whereas *al-Adab al-kabīr* corresponded to a more prosperous caliphal state.

The two works, *al-Taʾrīkh* (*The History*) and *the ʿArāʾis* (*Tales*) are the main works of my research. They are pioneering works on the prophets in history. *The History* is written in a fluid narrative form, a slight departure from the short *ḥadīth* accounts, but it upholds the importance of *isnād* (chain of transmission). By comparison, the *ʿArāʾis* is a literary work from Nīshāpūr, roughly compiled and written a century after al-Ṭabarī's *al-Taʾrīkh*, emphasising the narrative details (*matn*) of prophets and reflecting another side of the Islamic tradition from the east of the empire. There is a cultural difference in the emphasis between *isnād* and *matn* but the different narrative details (nuances in *matn*) are emphasised in this study

⁸⁵ Levy "Introduction", in *Qābūs*, ix-x.

because they reflect separate historical contexts of the compilers and cultural priorities between Baghdād and Nishāpūr. *The History* and *Tales of the Prophets* belong to different genres – historiography and exegesis respectively. The historiography includes the prophets of history and reflects the historical context under which it was written; the exegetical is more concerned about the prophetic history.⁸⁶ Yet both texts under the social function of myths can give new information about the forces at play when the texts were compiled.

Al-Ṭabarī's *The History* seems to be a *ḥadīth*-based historiography and it suggests that Islam has earned its global stamp by the tenth century. This work includes the two epochs of history from a Muslim perspective: the creation accounts, the Biblical figures who are regarded as prophets, the *Sīra* of the Prophet Muḥammad, the early caliphs and notable Muslims up to 915/302. The pre-Islamic narrative portion of the *History* have two sources: Biblical and Persian; the former was already used by Ibn Ishāq while the latter is defended by al-Ṭabarī who constructs a parallel between the Biblical Adam and the Persian Adam (Kayumarth) and his royal successors.⁸⁷ The narrative construct of Islamic history is built under the influence of the *Sīra* (Ibn Ishāq, Waqidī and *al-maghazī*). It is a major coverage of several centuries derived from Biblical sources along with Arabo-Persian Muslim sources.

There are opposing scholarly views about al-Ṭabarī's own voice in his *History*. Khālidī is of the opinion that the *History* is both an extension of the *ḥadīth* literature and its defence, because al-Ṭabarī in his opening comment of his work

⁸⁶ Klar, *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī's*, 9.

⁸⁷ Tarīf Khālidī, *Arabic historical thought in the classical period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 78

states that knowledge of the past is to be transmitted, not logically deduced.⁸⁸ It suggests that Khālidī views *History* more on the neutral side of presentation of the Islamic tradition than al-Ṭabarī's own personal interpretation of world history. It echoes Humphreys' idea that medieval historians were only to report past events as opposed to interpreting them.⁸⁹ Hodgson's view does not differ when he concludes that al-Ṭabarī deliberately leaves a deduced conclusion to the readers.⁹⁰ The neutrality of *History* hardly stands on much ground for other scholars (Meisami and Shoshan), given that al-Ṭabarī had a trained judicial mind and his encyclopaedic information of what is said about the history of prophecy and of Muslims. These scholars agree that al-Ṭabarī evaluates history by what is already said by his predecessors and on occasion he voices his opinion, even though transmission remains largely his scholarship.

Meisami, for example, takes Khālidī to task for his claim that there is a transition from *ḥadīth* to historiography and that with the advent of a new religion the Arabs learned a new history;⁹¹ she argues that historiography pre-existed al-Ṭabarī and that it had different functions from those of *ḥadīth*.⁹² She is of the opinion that al-Ṭabarī was not neutral in presenting the reported accounts of historical events, but rather he introduced controversial issues into history and his positioning of reports in the narrative constitute his own agenda and voice.⁹³ Shoshan joins Meisami's opposition, because he states that al-Ṭabarī deliberately voices his

⁸⁸ Khālidī, *Arabic historical*, 73. See also, *History*, volume 1, 168.

⁸⁹ R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic history* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 74.

⁹⁰ Marshall Hodgson, *The venture of Islam, conscience and history in a world civilization*, volume 1 (Chicago: The University Chicago Press, 1974), 352-53.

⁹¹ Khālidī, *Arabic historical*,

⁹² See book review by Julie Scott Meisami on Khālidī's *Arabic historical thought in classical period*, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, volume 116, no.2 (April-June, 1996): 310.

⁹³ Meisami on Khālidī's *Arabic historical*, 310.

concerns when he introduces reasons for certain events or phenomena, provide speculations and even draws conclusions.⁹⁴

Al-Thaʿlabī's *Tales of the Prophets* (ʿArāʾis) follows the same structure of al-Ṭabarī's creation accounts and the prophets. Originally the tales appeared in Arabic. It is not a work about history but his narrative is fuller with mythical details than al-Ṭabarī's *History*. However, the ʿArāʾis is indebted to the Qurʾānic texts about the prophets as the *āyāt* are woven into the narrative. The Qurʾān seems to be the highest source-authority among the other sound transmitters in the ʿArāʾis. In this respect, al-Thaʿlabī's ʿArāʾis bridges the *tafsīr* to *adab* (mythical-literature specifically) with fewer transmissions than in al-Ṭabarī.⁹⁵

As mentioned earlier, his major two works are his Qurʾānic commentary, *al-Kashf waʾl-bayān ʿan tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, and the ʿArāʾis *al-majālis fi qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. Other books are the *Qatlā al-Qurʾān* (biographical accounts of those who died upon hearing the Qurʾān); *al-Kāmil fi ʿilm al-Qurʾān* (lost) and *Rabīʿ al-mudhakkirīn*.⁹⁶ The *al-Kashf* was for a long time considered a controversial work because of its unorthodox use of the inclusive *ḥadīth*. At its beginning of *al-Kashf* al-Thaʿlabī rejected the Muʿtazilī doctrines – a natural stand considering his Shāfiʿī legal orientation. The social context of these tales is paramount to al-Thaʿlabī's theological quests especially through his interest in the ideas of the Ṣūfīs and the

⁹⁴ Boaz Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 115.

⁹⁵ There is other *qīṣaṣ* writing in the Islamic tradition; for example the eleventh-century *qīṣaṣ* by Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Maṣṣūr al-Nisābūrī (not available in English), and the twelfth-century Persian al-Kisāʾī's *Tales of the Prophets* which employs stronger imaginative detail in the anecdotes of the prophets. The eleventh-century *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* by the Spaniard exegete al-Ṭarafī is a less comprehensive work (it does not include all the listed prophets in al-Thaʿlabī's ʿArāʾis). The fifteenth century work of the Syrian exegete and historian Ibn al-Kathīr's *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* is another major work as part of his historical writing. There is also the Turkish writing of the *qīṣaṣ* by Nāṣir al-Dīn ibn Burhān al-Dīn al-Rabghūzī (lived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) who wrote *Stories of the prophets: qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* in an Eastern Turkish version.

⁹⁶ Marianna Klar, *Interpreting Thaʿlabī's tales of the prophets* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1.

Karrāmis. His narrative entails the relationship between the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth* – a strong Sunnī interpretative discipline – and allows the use of poetry with moderate use of the imagination to be part of the exegesis.

There are some aspects of al-Thaʿlabī’s interpretive methodology, at least from his *tafsīr*:⁹⁷ the relation between the Qurʾān and *tafsīr* catered faithfully to Sunnī piety; the prophetic *ḥadīth* was integrated into the exegetical skill; and the realm of *tafsīr* became more sophisticated to absorb new non- Sunnī intellectual ideals. Given these important developments, the scriptural exegesis at the Persian edge of the empire developed into a science capable to engage with other Islamic thoughts. Instead of having only the *ḥadīth* as means to interpret, Thaʿlabī has broken away from the attitude to *ḥadīth* as the only resource to the needs of the *ummah*. Al-Thaʿlabī had opened in his interpretative development a theological space within narrative means. In short, al-Thaʿlabī’s narrative detail includes a theological outlook.⁹⁸

A number of biographical dictionaries, originally in Arabic, are consulted in this thesis. They are from different historical periods and reflect the views about al-Ṭabarī, al-Thaʿlabī and their cities. The biographical dictionaries are: *Muʿjam al-buldān* and *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ* by the Syrian geographical traveller Yāqūt (d. 1229/626); *al-Muntaẓam fī taʾrīkh al-umam* by the Ḥanbalī scholar and preacher Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201/597); *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfiʿīyya al-kubrā* by al-Subkī (d. 1370/771); the *Kitāb wafayāt al-aʿyān* by the Iraqi biographer Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282/681); and *al-Kamil fī-l taʾrīkh* by the Iraqi Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233/630). The biographers in

⁹⁷ Walid Saleh, “Hermeneutics: al-Thaʿlabī”, in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, Andrew Rippin, ed (West Sussex: Blackwell Publication Ltd, 2006), 324.

⁹⁸ Saleh, “Hermeneutics: al-Thaʿlabī”, 330.

medieval Islam often copied from each other and so there is much overlapping of information among the biographical dictionaries; some do not give factual data, like date of birth or deaths, but often they mention the legal orientation (*madhhab*) of the scholars, the written works, the mentors and their influences, and possibly their travelling expeditions.

0.2.3 Chapter outline

There are five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One argues that the *qiṣaṣ* are *adab* (literature, myth) and not just religious literature. This justifies studying the *qiṣaṣ* as literature which mirrors the cultural, religious and political movements of the time in which they were compiled. I am including also the summary of the narrative accounts of the three prophets, Joseph, David and Solomon, as told by al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī, even though these are generally known Biblical stories.

Chapter Two is about the historical contexts of both al-Ṭabarī's Baghdād and al-Thaʿlabī's Nīshāpūr; the topologies of the two cities are described in considerable detail, followed by the biographical information of our two scholars: their education and mentors, their legal schools, the political environment and the intellectual milieu in which they grew up; in addition, their major influences on later Sunnī tradition will be part of the discussion.

Chapters Three, Four and Five are analytical with regard to the themes of leadership, friendship and enmity. At the beginning of each of the last three chapters, I will draw upon what Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and Kay Kāʾūs say in their advice literature on the theme of the chapter. I translate parts of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's *al-Adab al-kabīr* and *al-Adab al-ṣaghīr* in Arabic since they are not available in English. The *Qābūs-*

nāma is available in English translation. Then, the narrative differences between al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī will be considered in view of the contextual differences between their cities and what wisdom their narratives offer to the rulers. In this way, the social functions of the *qiṣaṣ* as myth will be applied to view how our two scholars reflect on their societies in Baghdād and Nīshāpūr, and what they advise based on their portrayals of the three prophets.

A conclusion will address what this thesis has accomplished. Primarily, there are three questions to be answered: Do the *qiṣaṣ* constitute advisory literature to rulers? And what do these *qiṣaṣ* say about the religio-political influences on al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī? Finally, though it is not the big question in this thesis, in what ways are the *qiṣaṣ* relevant for today?

0.2.4 A few logistics

All the transliterated words are italicised unless they are proper nouns: the *ʿulamāʾ* (scholars) but Baghdād or Nīshāpūr. Footnotes are listed according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. For example, all names of academic books and encyclopaedias are italicised; an article or a section of a book is referred to in between quotation marks; for example the article on the devil (*Iblīs*) in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition, appears in the footnote as: “Iblīs” in *EF*², volume 3, 668. The *EQ* when used stands for the Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān.

I will provide both the dates in common era (CE) and its equivalent in Islamic calendar since it is the common practice among academics. For example, vizier X died in 901 CE, this translates to 288 AH; in short it is (d. 901/288).

Finally, regarding the main primary texts of al-Ṭabarī's *al-Taʾrīkh* (*History*) and *ʿArāʾis wa-l majālis fī-l qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (*The Tales of the Prophets*), I use both the Arabic and English versions. In footnotes I give references to both Arabic and English texts. *Al-Taʾrīkh*⁹⁹ is a vast work translated by a number of scholars; different volumes have different translators. The story of al-Ṭabarī's Joseph is in volume 2 while those of David and Solomon are in volume 3. The *ʿArāʾis*¹⁰⁰ was translated in 2002 while volume 2 and 3 of *al-Taʾrīkh* in 1987; all three were translated by William Z. Brinner (d. 2011), a long-term scholar in Arabic and Islamic studies. However, most of my translations from Arabic into English are from Ibn al-Muqaffa's two works of *al-Adab al-kabīr* and *al-Adab al-ṣaghīr*.

⁹⁹ I use the Arabic text of al-Ṭabarī's *al-Taʾrīkh* which is published by Dār al-kutb al-ʿilmiyya in Beirut, 1997.

¹⁰⁰ I use the Arabic text of al-Thaʿlabī's *ʿArāʾis* published in Egypt by Muṣṭafa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī and sons, 1954.

Chapter One

1.0 The *Qışaş al-anbiyā*’ between religious and cultivated literature

1.1 Genesis and function of *adab*

There is a pedagogical connection between *adab* and *qışaş* since both recollect some pre-Islamic virtues into a Muslim context. For example, before the seventh century in Arabia, *al-adab* related to the pre-Islamic notion of *muruwwah* (manly virtues in facing challenges) which became an Islamic virtue. Likewise *adab* also deals with social etiquette. Ibn Kunāsah (d.824/208), a scholar of *ḥadīth*, supports this supposition in the following excerpt from his writings, in which he expresses his disappointment with a pupil: “He who studies *adab* and does not act on it [and] fails to control his passions is no *adīb*.”¹⁰¹ This quote suggests that *adab* describes social virtues by which to shape one’s conduct in a given society.

It was during the classical age from the ninth to the eleventh century that Islamic prose writing emerged with a flourishing potential. The *qışaş al-anbiyā*’, collected from the *ḥadīth* literature, the Qur’ān and extra-biblical sources, emerged during this period as narrative prose in the form of short stories or anecdotes about the Biblical prophets in history. Its primary purpose was to inform the faithful Muslims about the lives of prophets, encourage them to lead moral lives and to emulate prophetic virtues. The narratives of these stories also seek to integrate Qur’ānic themes with ethical values expected from political and religious leaders. Although the *qışaş* are religious writing, they function in a way quite similar to the non-religious narrative prose (*adab*). Like *adab*-prose the *qışaş* integrate ideas from

¹⁰¹ S.A. Bonebakker, “Adab and the concept of belles letters”, in *The Cambridge history of Arabic literature ‘Abbāsīd belles-lettres*, edited by Julia Ashtiany, Johnstone, T.M, Latham, J.D, Serjeant, R.B and Smith, Rex (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 24.

the past and transform information into lessons for readers. In this chapter, two questions are addressed; first, how do the scholars view *adab*? Second, how do we situate the *qiṣaṣ* among the different genre of *adab* writing?

Clarity of the Arabic term of *adab* can help us to connect the *qiṣaṣ* to the Arabic literature. Originally, *adab* may have had its source in the Sumerian term *é-dub-ba-a* which means a “school” or “university” as found in a tablet roughly dated 2000 BCE.¹⁰² This suggests that prior to Islamic civilisation, *al-adab* was a reference to institutional learning and to instructions. It seems that this old concept of *adab* is connected to the sharing of knowledge and providing advice.

In the early Arab context of Islam, the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry was preserved in writings during the Umayyad and the ʿAbbāsīd dynasties. Their *adab* includes memories of the past. Some of the early rare texts of poetry on *adab* invoke the notion of custom and good upbringing.¹⁰³ The *Kitāb al-aghānī*, a *dīwān* – by Abu’l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 967/356), is one example of how values from the past are preserved. It includes pre-Islamic poetry revealing the Bedouin themes of lament, music, poetry, chivalry, honour, shame, and fate. Other writings are in the form of instructive letters (*rasāʾil*)¹⁰⁴ or manuals written by *kuttāb* – secretaries - who were employed by the Umayyad and the ʿAbbāsīd rulers in order to advise their rulers on matters of governance. Such manuals, which borrowed from Greek ideas, served to guide rulers in moral conduct; they were the conduit for scholarship to Arabic prose

¹⁰² Ilse Lichtenstadter, *Introduction to classical Arabic literature* (New York: Schocken Book, 1976), 110.

¹⁰³ Early Islamic poetry by Abū’l ʿIlāl al-Ḥudhalī who wrote: “Sometimes the nobility of his grandfather and *adab* show a man the way to deed of good repute.” This quote reveals *adab* both as a custom and upbringing. See Bonebakker’s “Adab and the concept”, 17.

¹⁰⁴ These *rasāʾil* by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ were a distinct branch of prose literature as they reflect change in the intellectual climate due to the on-going translation of the sciences into Arabic. See Stephan Leder and Hilary Kilpatrick, “Classical Arabic prose literature: a researchers’ sketch map”, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, volume 23, no.1 (1992): 8.

or *adab*.¹⁰⁵ The meaning of *adab* is not solely about manners and conduct; rather it evolved to mean written material.

In the modern sense, *adab* is synonymous with *belles lettres* (or cultivated literature) which is in medieval Arabic writings. However, scholars of medieval Arabic writings have different perspectives of *adab* than just *belles lettres*.¹⁰⁶ Nallino and Pellat both trace the development of the meaning of *adab*. Nallino accepts that all literary writings are *adab* while Pellat questions the validity of such a wide inclusion when medieval *adab* does not include religious writings, given that religious writing constitutes the majority of medieval Islamic writing.¹⁰⁷ The distinction between religious and non-religious prose is crucial in the classical age and has limited the scope of dialogue between them. By way of example, the *Fihrist*¹⁰⁸ of Ibn Nadīm (d. 996/385) favours religious writing to the non-religious literary and popular narrative¹⁰⁹ (although he mentions in the last section the *Hazar Afsan* or “a thousand stories”).¹¹⁰ The term “*qiṣṣa*”¹¹¹ (singular for “story”) is not among Ibn Nadīm’s categories of classification of books, which suggests that the *qiṣṣa* is a later phenomenon in the *adab* genre. Instead of the *qiṣṣa*, Ibn Nadīm refers to the *sīra* (a biography) which is the closest he gets with respect to biographical figures whose *sunna* is worthy of emulation.

¹⁰⁵ Lichtenstadter, *Introduction to classical*, 111.

¹⁰⁶ Bonebakker, “Adab and the concept”, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Bonebakker, “Adab and the concept”, 22.

¹⁰⁸ The *Fihrist* provides a framework for all sciences in the Arabic-Islamic milieu, and it classifies these sciences into literary writing, historical traditions, biographies, genealogies, poetry, poets and grammarians. See Wen Chin Ouyang, *Literary criticism in medieval Arabic-Islamic culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 38.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Irwin, *The Penguin anthology of classical Arabic literature* (London: Penguin Group, 1999), 150-51.

¹¹⁰ Ḥasan el-Shāmy, “A motif index of *alf laylah wa laylah*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 36 (2005): 241.

¹¹¹ This was because the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* were considered part of the popular culture which was not generally accepted by the *ʿulamāʾ*. See Stephan Leder and Hilary Kilpatrick, “Classical Arabic”: 19.

The gap between religious and non-religious writings was tightened earlier than the tenth century by al-Jāḥiẓ who expanded the *adab* to include any writings that could be considered beneficial for the reader.¹¹² His *adab* is of an instructional kind and he views the social function of *adab* as a bridge between the cultural formation and the ethical existence of the society; this shows the progress of his thoughts. The social function of *adab* appropriates meaning of past customs to define and educate Muslims on the social norms evolving in medieval Islam. Hence *adab* forms a good society and cultivates refined social etiquette. This is similar to the function of the *qīṣaṣ*; they instruct readers about upholding ethical standard and to live in harmony with God's word.

Bonebakker's "Adab and the concept of belles-lettres" surveys the development of *adab* through its literary representation across Islamic history. He refers to Pellat's thoughts on *adab*, in relation to the moral, social and the intellectual life in the post classical age (between 1258 and 1798 – a period between the Mongols' attack on Baghdād and Napoleon's invasion to Egypt). However, Bonebakker's understanding of Nallino's thoughts on *adab* entails a relation between the *adab* and *ʿilm* (specialised knowledge) of the ancestry customs, ethical and social norms along with the intellectual domain.¹¹³ Nallino views *adab* manifesting the knowledge of social etiquette.

Given that *adab* includes instruction in the social etiquette, Allen in *The Arabic Literary Heritage* makes a subtle distinction between "*adab*" and "literature".

¹¹² Bonebakker, "Adab and the concept", 22.

¹¹³ Bonebakker, "Adab and the concept", 17.

“Literature”, he argues, is a recent invention¹¹⁴ which demands studies of its history, while *adab* is a unique term that denotes education and manners; only the *udabāʾ* (teachers and writers of literature) are the educators of literature.¹¹⁵ Consequently, an *adīb* (singular of “*udabāʾ*”) enjoyed social standing and presence in the intellectual sphere and had knowledge on a variety of subjects like philosophy, history and morality.¹¹⁶ The *adab* went through a slow metamorphosis as it began to represent the learned society in Arabic, the language in which the Qurʾān had found its expression. As Islamic society spread and gained multi-cultural status, the function of *adab* became more diversified, becoming both instructional and entertaining.¹¹⁷ Similarly, the *qīṣaṣ* offer entertainment while they promote prophetic obedience to God’s revelation and how to lead believers to form a good Muslim society. On the one hand, the *adab* became an instructional medium for rulers to learn something about running a government, and on the other hand entertained and enlightened minds on a variety of subjects. Early key figures of *adab* prose were Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, Ibn Qutaybah (d.889/275) and al-Jāḥiẓ (d.869/255).

Although *al-adab* embodies comprehensive knowledge of several subjects of enquiry, according to Ibn Qutaybah it is distinct from *ʿilm* (specialised knowledge).¹¹⁸ In his book *ʿUyūn al-akḥbār*, he quotes from Abūʾl-Sawād, “Kings are governors over the people, and the scholars are governors over the kings.”¹¹⁹ He equates the supremacy of *ʿilm* with leadership of the *umma*. Yet the author cautions

¹¹⁴ This includes literary criticism (*naqd al-ʿarabī*) which is secondary literature to evaluate and judge other related texts. Literary criticism was non-existing in the tenth-century of the Islamic culture. See Ouyang, *Literary criticism*, 1-2.

¹¹⁵ Roger Allen, *The Arabic literary heritage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2-3.

¹¹⁶ Allen, *The Arabic literary*, 221.

¹¹⁷ Allen, *The Arabic literary*, 222.

¹¹⁸ Bonebakker, “Adab and the concept”, 24.

¹¹⁹ Abī Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba al-dīnawārī, *ʿUyūn al-akḥbār*, volume 2 (Cairo: al-muʿasasa al-ʿamma, 1963), 121.

that the absence of *adab* is a drawback of knowledge, “if *adab* passes you then strictly observe silence.”¹²⁰ This is expressed well in Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Rabbihi’s (d. 940/328) *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, as he in turn quotes Ibn Qutayba,

ʿAbd Allāh b. Sallam b. Qutaybah once said ‘whoever wants to be a scholar let him specialise in one science, and whoever wants to be an *adīb* let him specialise in sciences.’¹²¹

Both *adab* and *ʿilm* relate to knowledge and convey beneficial ideas to either enlighten the mind or to cause social transformation by description and instruction. In this way, *adab* is an expression of *ʿilm* because an *adīb* during the classical age acquired comprehensive knowledge of several subjects of enquiry as opposed to being a specialist in one science; an *adīb* can write about several subjects without necessarily being a specialised consultant in one specific area of study. This is synonymous with the claim by Khālīdī about *adab* being “the total educational system of a cultured Muslim who took the whole world for his object of curiosity and knowledge.”¹²²

It is no surprise then that the *adab* by the tenth century represented the social and moral cultural precepts of the day. *Al-adab* and *al-ʿilm* grew in medieval Islam to refer to one another so that knowledge is imparted to the one who reads *adab*. For example, al-Ṭabarī has written on the history of the prophets, though he was a reputable scholar on the Qurʾānic sciences, *fiqh*, *ḥadīth* and Arabic. In short, this makes him also an *adīb* according to the idea expressed by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi. The same can be said about al-Thaʿlabī in Nīshāpūr. It is not farfetched therefore to

¹²⁰ Ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn*, volume 2, 176.

¹²¹ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Rabbihi, *Al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, volume 2 (Cairo: maṭbaʿat al-istiḳāmat, 1940), 75.

¹²² Tārif Khālīdī, *Classical Arab Islam: the culture heritage of the golden age* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1986), 57.

consider these two religious scholars as *udabāʿ*: well versed on a number of subjects and transmitting knowledge through their prose.

1.2 Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and al-Jāhiz: storytelling

Story-telling is part of *adab* and a powerful way to educate and entertain readers about proper conduct and how an individual relate to the larger society. *Qiṣaṣ* are stories by definition and some Muslim thinkers have used story-telling techniques in their *adab*. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ was a celebrity *kātib* (secretary) under the last Umayyad dynasty and during the early ʿAbbāsid reign. He had lived through the transition from one dynasty to another while staying close to the centre of power, the caliphate. Like most court secretaries, he was of Persian origin and well versed in Arabic; he also translated original works into Arabic, such as the *Kalila wa Dimnah*, animal fables reflecting human behaviour in moral garb and offering worldly wisdom to resolve human predicaments.¹²³ Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ adapted ideas from these fables, well known to the Sasanian court, to advise and guide Muslim political leaders in an urban setting. He re-oriented the Islamic culture of his day through *Kalila wa Dimnah* by using the political reality of an older order, primarily Sasanian.

The influence of foreign cultures on Arab Islam is studied by Bosworth who views *adab* as an imprint of Persian traditions on Arabic prose.¹²⁴ He argues that the Persian presence had no equal in early Islam. Bosworth's claim was that the *adab* emerged through translation and engagement with foreign ideas on politics and court

¹²³ J.D. Latham, "Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and early ʿAbbāsid prose", in *The Cambridge history of Arabic literature ʿAbbāsid belles-lettres*, edited by Julia Ashtiany, T.M. Johnstone, J.D. Latham, R.B. Serjeant and G. Rex Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge Press University, 1990), 51.

¹²⁴ C.E. Bosworth, "The Persian impact on Arabic literature", in *Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period*, edited by A.F.L. Beeston, T.M. Johnstone, R.B. Serjeant and G.R. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 485.

etiquette (e.g., the translation of Aristotle's letter to Alexander just before Alexander goes to war). The problem with this argument is that not all Arabic prose embodies foreign imprints from other cultures. For example, the *tafsīr* and the *ḥadīth* writings do not rely exclusively on ideas from foreign sources. Original religious writings first appeared in Arabic, including those written by non-Arab Muslims. Therefore the exclusion of religious prose from the *adab* corpus proves problematic, for one cannot conclude that medieval Muslims writing in Arabic relied always and only on foreign sources.

Ibn al-Muqaffa^c also promoted polite behaviour, the other meaning of *adab*. In his original work *al-Adab al-kabīr*, he sets up the rules of conduct for a ruler to build lasting fraternal friendships.¹²⁵ He advocates in his book that those subject to the ruler must support the ruler regardless of whether he is a just or unjust leader. He does not advise the rulers to be just and moral because it may risk rebellion against the ruler. This may reflect that the *kuttāb*'s livelihood depended entirely on courtly patronage, so they did not want to risk their livelihood by what they advise. However, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c introduced the Sasanian court life into the Arabo-Islamic milieu. His *adab* prose offers the framework of the courtly etiquette of early urban Islam.

Ibn al-Muqaffa^c used *adab* to build a framework to approach politics. However, al-Jāḥiẓ used *adab* to promote the good society. He had a wider range of interests than Ibn al-Muqaffa^c; he wrote to bring out human traits of wit and folly in those whom he observed. His main interests included Mu^ctazilite theology and politics on the one hand, and *adab* on the other. His literary works were

¹²⁵ Latham, "Ibn al-Muqaffa^c", 60-61.

comprehensive *adab*; his work encompassed wide sources of tradition; it examined their originalities, injected entertaining anecdotes into serious matters and wrote in a playful but witty style.¹²⁶

The importance of al-Jāḥiẓ's writing was its focus on the study of manners using psychological enquiry as an analytical approach to *adab*.¹²⁷ He promoted the Arab culture and saw Islam through critical Greek logic. He used *adab* to build a new culture with the capacity to reflect on its past and its legacy from other cultures. For him *adab* represents an author's wit and moral insight for readers to appropriate. He connected the use of *adab*, in the literary form of *belles-lettres*, with the formation of a good ethical society. As he widened the scope of *adab* to embrace a multitude of subjects, he formed a literary ethical approach of the social function of literature.

Both Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] and al-Jāḥiẓ gave the fables (stories with animals as main characters) a permanent place in the *adab*, at a time when storytelling was not encouraged in religious circles under the Umayyad and the early [°]Abbāsīd dynasty, and these anecdotes became a legitimate instrument for portraying Islamic society and challenging its readers. The anecdote as a story-telling tool became the textual representation of the moral *ethos* of the evolution of Islamic culture.¹²⁸ Though the stories of the prophets were known among the religious, it was through the story-telling of Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] and al-Jāḥiẓ that the political reality and the social

¹²⁶ Charles Pellat, "Al- Jāḥiẓ", in *The Cambridge history of Arabic literature °Abbāsīd belles-lettres*, edited by Julia Ashtiany, T.M. Johnstone, J.D. Latham, R.B. Serjeant and G. Rex Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge Press University, 1990), 86.

¹²⁷ Pellat, "Al-Jāḥiẓ", 93.

¹²⁸ The term "ethos" is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "the spirit" of a given culture. Other related meaning of "ethos" could be mood, conduct, tenor, feeling, characteristics, standards and ethics. Al-Jāḥiẓ, however, put the prose narrative in the service of the expected moral norms of his Baṣran society.

etiquette of the society were engaged before the *qışaş al-anbiyāʿ* were compiled and edited to represent the pious Islamic society of the time. By the time the *qışaş* became a genre of literature, al-Thaʿlabī wrote and compiled the first significant *Tales of the Prophets* (*ʿArāʾis*) in the eleventh century,¹²⁹ the prose narrative had become a legitimate and accepted literary form for the representation of cultural and religious norms. The *qışaş* therefore were not the first writings to reflect cultural and religious norms. Like al-Jāhiz’s *adab*, the *qışaş al-anbiyāʿ* illustrate the ethical mandate of leaders as informed by the Qurʾānic values. These tales of prophets overlap with the wider *adab*-prose and also contain animated anecdotes.¹³⁰ Similarly, the *qışaş al-anbiyāʿ*, like Ibn Muqaffaʿ’s political function of the *adab*, portray something about the political leadership of certain prophets (e.g. David and Solomon).

1.3 Biography genre as historiography in comparison to the *qışaş*

The *qışaş* share a common feature with Muslim biographies, which is namely organising knowledge about notable Muslim figures whose contributions to the *umma* were acknowledged as part of their leadership. In the early Islamic community the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet was a major source of information about the sayings and the deeds of Muḥammad, as well as references to early transmitters who were close to the Prophet and knew his thoughts. With the expansion of the Muslim community, the *ḥadīth* was written down with the intention of preserving the authenticity of sources. By the ninth century, with the increased interest by Muslims in the life of the Prophet, historiography of Islam had begun to emerge, organising in

¹²⁹ Tottoli, “Narrative literature”, 469.

¹³⁰ The accounts of Solomon in al-Ṭabarī and in al-Thaʿlabī include conversations with the birds.

biographical form information about notable Muslims.¹³¹ Biographical dictionaries became essentially one form of organised knowledge about notable Muslims whose services to their communities were acknowledged as part of their leadership.

How do these biographical dictionaries reflect history? Gibb and Khālidi have considered this question. The pre-supposed aspect of their enquiry is that biographical dictionaries have something to offer to historians. Gibb approached the question from a methodological viewpoint which takes into consideration motivation, selection, biographical structure, sources of biographical notices and the value of biographies for historical studies.¹³² Gibb also observes that the history of a Muslim society is embedded in the knowledge of contributions of individual Muslims. Thus the author of a biography selects his subjects based on their contribution to the Muslim society and to a particular sector within which their contribution occurred. These biographies are structured to furnish information on dates of birth and death, status, health and intelligence as long as they are associated to the category selected (e.g. ranks of doctors or *muḥaddithūn*).

Khālidi on the other hand, tests Gibb's categories of motive, selectivity, method and subjective evaluation of history, by studying nineteen biographical dictionaries from the eleventh to eighteenth century. In terms of motivation, Khālidi uses a cross section of Muslim biographers to make his point. For example, Ibn Ḥazm's (d.1064/456) motivation for listing genealogies (*ansāb*) of caliphs was to help the reader understand forbidden marriages during medieval Islam.¹³³ On the other hand, Yāqūt's biographies of men of letters include scholars of religion who

¹³¹ Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 55 and 105.

¹³² Hamilton A.R. Gibb, "Islamic biographical literature," in *Historians of the Middle East*, edited by Bernard Lewis and P.M. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 54-58.

¹³³ Tārif Khālidi, "Islamic biographical dictionaries", *The Muslim World* 63, 1, (1973): 55.

were not religious.¹³⁴ Concerning method and selection of information, some authors relied on non-reliable *isnāds* and selected subjects from wider social circles. For instance, al-Kutubī's biographical dictionary *Fawāt al wafayāt*, highlights the poetic talent, poverty and asceticism of ordinary Muslims. Khālidī concludes from these studies that the biographers were able to connect biography with history without diminishing the religious tradition.

This is also reflected in the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of prophetic figures. These prophets are subordinated to the prophetic ideal of Muḥammad – the prime *motivation* for their appearance. The *qīṣaṣ* include history of prophetic models that are portrayed as ideal leaders of their *umma*. Hence, the author of *qīṣaṣ* utilises the category of *selectivity*, exclusively the prophets, even though the *qīṣaṣ* are not representing the prophets as a social class of a particular city or a living society in Islam. *Selectivity* also involves utilising the various *isnāds* or sources which differ among the various *qīṣaṣ*. It seems that the *qīṣaṣ* and the biographical dictionaries therefore share common characteristics (*motivation* and *selectivity*) to portray an Islamic view of culture and history.

Basically, a biography is an account of someone's life from the date of birth to the date of death. The basic unit of information (*khābar*) about someone is preserved with *isnād* (reliable transmission), which refers to a notable figure such as a *nabī* or *khalīf*, or biographical reference, or anecdote.¹³⁵ Islamic biographies represent almost mythical or exaggerated prototype figures like holy warriors or pious exemplars, instead of the authentic person. Ibn Shaddād's biography of Ṣalāḥ

¹³⁴ Khālidī, "Islamic biographical": 55.

¹³⁵ A.J. Wensinck, "Khabar (a) plural al-akhbār, akhābīr", in *ET*, volume 4 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 895.

al Dīn presents the latter as a model *mujāhid* in the defence of the *umma* against the Crusaders.¹³⁶ Whether Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn was in fact a *mujāhid* was not necessarily the intent of the author's story. The biographer portrays an ideal rather than a historically accurate figure. The same point can be made regarding the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* which being close to the biographical genre also promote the ideal leadership of prophets.

The narrative process used in the writing of a biography is a symbolic portrayal of historical reality such as establishing a legitimate hegemony under a holy warrior.¹³⁷ Biography preserves forms of legitimization that can be moral, pious, genealogical or theocratic.¹³⁸ We, thus, have biographies that are used to promote exemplary figures and to establish legitimization within written traditions. The biographical materials rarely convey insight into the personality of the subject, unless they are associated with other categories like *futūḥ* (conquests) or *fitna* (conflict within a Muslim community).¹³⁹ Once again in the *qīṣaṣ* some prophets have conquered new territories as a way to expand the Islamic faith and through the narrative detail of the conquests the reader gets a better glimpse of the narrative character of the prophet (e.g. King David). Such conquests reflect the seriousness of a prophet's commitment to spread the faith and convey his religious character.

After Ibn Ishāq's biography of the Prophet Muḥammad (later edited by Ibn Hishām), biographical dictionaries are the second earliest form of medieval Arab biographies and the most prevalent Islamic biographical material. They include the *sīyar* (biographies of substantial lengths like the Prophet's or other eminent figures), *tarjama* (short biographical notices like necrologies), *manāqib* (laudatory

¹³⁶ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 62.

¹³⁷ Fred Donner, *Narratives*, 210.

¹³⁸ Donner, *Narratives*, 214.

¹³⁹ Gibb, "Islamic biographical", 57.

hagiographies of admirable moral figures) and *muḥaddithūn* (transmitters of *ḥadīth* or religious traditions, which like biographical materials, offer considerable reliability).¹⁴⁰ Originally, the subjects of biographical dictionaries belonged to religious social classes as in Ibn Saʿd's (d. 845/230) *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*. However later biographers, such as Ibn Khallikān (d.1282/681) in his *Wafayāt al-aʿyān* widened the circle of inclusion from the religious elite to notable Muslims who through their expertise served the *umma*. The medieval biographical dictionaries represent much of the Islamic culture and not just the religious sector. The religiosity of the medieval Muslim society, however, was slowly challenged by authors of later biographies depicting non-religious but notable figures. For example, Ibn Abī Usaybiʿa's *Ṭabaqāt al-aṭṭibāʾ* (ranks of doctors) complements the knowledge of Islam by providing biographical information that demonstrates the science of medicine. As a result of these biographies, non-religious aspects of medieval Islamic society were beginning to emerge.

It is rather interesting that the political leaders were engaged in the craftsmanship of governance and the learned scholars were in fact contributing to the dissemination of organised knowledge. Both politicians and scholars represent a two-fold leadership of a Muslim society. Scholars are essential guide to keep political leaders in line with certain precepts. In the case of the *qīṣaṣ*, the organised knowledge promotes the ideal of prophets and illustrates the struggle to keep progressing towards the ideal in order for the temporal leaders to reflect upon their actual leadership. Therefore leadership of the *umma* could be viewed as shared

¹⁴⁰ M.J.L Young, "Arabic biographical writing", in *Religion, learning and science in the ʿAbbāsid period*, edited by M.J.L Young, J.D. Latham, and R.B. Serjeant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 168.

between the scholars and the politicians. Scholars would communicate in a systematic manner with the governing leaders as shown in the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*¹⁴¹ which were written by learned Muslims to respond to and influence the temporal political figures.

1.4 *Khutṭāb* and '*ulamā'*: proponents and adversaries of the popular culture

By the tenth century, as the use of *isnād* varied among Muslim writers, the authenticity of transmitted knowledge became a thorny issue between the religious scholars (*al-ʿulamā'*) and the less specialised advocates of the faith such as the popular preachers (*al-khutṭāb*). Given that the *Shuʿūbiyya* had unleashed the spirit of inclusivity by incorporating non-Arab heritages into the Muslim context, the religious scholars feared the inevitable: losing the Arab stamp on Islam and slowly being undermined by foreign influences.

Popular religion and culture flourished in the eleventh century and penetrated into the Ṣūfī orders, though Ṣūfism was an earlier phenomenon with roots reaching back to the seventh century CE.¹⁴¹ In the first two centuries of Islam, Ṣūfism prospered. Times were peaceful and it grew in numbers. It was not until the ninth century that hostility broke out between Ṣūfism and institutionalised Islam, culminating in the tenth century with the persecution of al-Ḥallāj. It took another century, and until the time of al-Ghazālī (d.1111/504) that permanent reconciliation between Ṣūfism and Sunnī Islam became possible.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Fazlur Raḥmān, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 150.

¹⁴² George Makdisī, "The Ḥanbalī school of learning", in *Religion, Law and Learning in Classical Islam* (Hampshire: Variorum, 1991), 115.

Although the term *qaṣaṣ* is hard to define in the context of early medieval Islam, it was taken as a public speech on religious matters.¹⁴³ A Muslim preacher (al-*qāṣṣ*)¹⁴⁴ preached on religious matters referred to in the Qur'ān, the *ḥadīth* and the stories of ancient prophets, to admonish and moralise his audience. He was generally reputed to be highly educated, and to have performed many charitable deeds within his community.¹⁴⁵ Preaching was traditionally regarded as part of the *Sunna*, since the Prophet was a preacher in Mecca. The root *q-ṣ-ṣ* means to communicate with others (Q 28:25; 3:62; 7:176; 12:3) usually edifying stories, which is an indication that the belief in the role of preaching is legitimate.¹⁴⁶ But the Qur'ānic significance of the root *q-ṣ-ṣ* is associated exclusively with the tales of the ancient prophets. In later medieval times, the word *qāṣṣ* became associated with a preacher who has credible knowledge of the Qur'ān and the religious tradition.

In essence, the medieval Islamic *khuṭba* (sermon) included certain specific features:¹⁴⁷ preaching had to be harmonious with *ʿilm* (religious knowledge in particular) which depended on the nature of the topic; the legitimate authority of the transmission; and the professional identity of the transmitter. Further, preaching on the stories of Prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*) had to exemplify the ideal Muslim for the faithful. There was a definite connection between the anecdotes of prophets and the on-going preaching in the medieval period. Though this connection between the

¹⁴³ Khalīl ʿAthamina defines it as “religious preaching”. See his “Al-Qaṣaṣ: its emergence, religious origin and its socio-political impact on early Muslim society”, *Studia Islamica*, 76 (1992): 53.

¹⁴⁴ A preacher, especially during Friday sermon, is also known as *khaṭīb*.

¹⁴⁵ ʿAthamina, “Al-Qaṣaṣ”: 54.

¹⁴⁶ Pellat, “*Kiṣṣa*”, 185.

¹⁴⁷ Jonathan Berkey, *Popular preaching and religious authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University Washington Press, 2001), 20.

qışaṣ and popular preaching has been studied, not extensively¹⁴⁸, one can imagine the effect of preaching in the dissemination of the anecdotes of the prophets to the uneducated and the illiterate.

The art of preaching reached a major turning point with the flourishing of popular culture within Islam, in juxtaposition to the learned Muslim elite (in particular the *‘ulamā’*). Popular preaching paid less attention to the accuracy of the sources of the anecdotes of the prophets, but to the Muslim elite the transmission of sources had to be accurate. Materialism was another reason for the mistrust of popular preachers by the Muslim elite who felt these preachers abused their profession for selfish reasons by begging or by charging for their preaching, and their misrepresentation of the *ḥadīth* just augmented that distrust.¹⁴⁹ The lack of proficiency in their preaching became an alarming concern of the *‘ulamā’* and as a result they started to systemise the art of preaching; this reaction by the *‘ulamā’* must have had an impact on how the tales of the prophets were used in preaching.

The ability to convey knowledge through preaching became the primary conflict between the *‘ulamā’* and the masses— the cultural elite versus the lower social classes. The *‘ulamā’* feared the loss of leadership and authority in transmitting *‘ilm* forcing them to take a stand against the storytellers – *quṣṣāṣ* — who were initially preachers. However, the growing antagonism between the *‘ulamā’* and the popular culture was not about orthodoxy versus heresy. Rather, the conflict was about the formation of orthodoxy in the absence of a centralized religious authority

¹⁴⁸ Berkey refers to the problem of misuse of the *qışaṣ* in preaching by those who were not well trained by the *‘ulamā’*. See his *Formation of Islam. Religion and society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 253-256.

¹⁴⁹ Athamina, “Al-Qaṣaṣ”: 55.

that had to address both the political and social balance of power.¹⁵⁰ Therefore the transmission of knowledge became a sensitive conflict and a contentious one, as popular preaching was expanding outside the customary places for gatherings (like mosques). The *‘ulamā’* used their influence on the ruling class to fight against the popular preaching and to place limitations on untrained preachers. The result of which might have been that the *qiṣaṣ* told by the popular preachers address a different audience than the *qiṣaṣ* written by the *‘ulamā’*.

In all fairness, popular preaching played a significant role in spreading the tales of the prophets to the masses at large, as not all Muslims had access to books or reading skills. However it was the compiled *qiṣaṣ* that provided reliable sources and material for preaching about the ideals of the prophets. The problem remained the authenticity of the stories being transmitted by preachers and how this might have affected the formation of the *Sunnī* Orthodoxy.

One of the major critics of popular preachers was the Ḥanbalī scholar of Ibn al-Jawzī.¹⁵¹ He was a celebrity preacher in Baghdād with a growing audience. He owed his fame to the strength of his preaching and the revival of *Sunnī* traditionalism.¹⁵² Ibn al-Jawzī also enjoyed political favour which he used to oppose any movement against the traditionalist *Sunnī* forces (a strong Ḥanbalī streak).¹⁵³ He was, however, an advocate of preaching and an authority on the Islamic sermon; he

¹⁵⁰ Alexander Knysh, ““Orthodoxy” and “Heresy” in Medieval Islam: an essay in reassessment”, *The Muslim World*, 83, 1 (1993): 66-67.

¹⁵¹ There were other critics: Ibn al-Ḥājj (d.1336/736); Zayn al-Din al-‘Iraqī (d. 1414/817); Jalāl al-Din al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505/911); ‘Alī bin Maymūn al-Idrīsī (d. 1511/917) a Ṣūfī from Morocco.

¹⁵² There is a difference between the *traditionalist* and *traditionist*. The latter is a specialist in the tradition e.g., a *ḥāfiẓ*. The traditonalist is one who belongs to a movement of revival in medieval Islam in opposition to the rationalist tendencies. The Ḥanbalites were strong supporters of this movement. See Merlin Swartz’s translation of Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa’l-mudhakkirīn* (Beirut: Dār el-Machreq Éditeurs, 1986), 25. Swartz provided these definitions by reference to Makdisī’s study on Ibn ‘Aqīl and the re-emergence of traditional Islam.

¹⁵³ Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, 32.

wrote a manual for preachers in an attempt to maintain an acceptable standard by listing the requirements, qualities, lifestyle and education of preachers.¹⁵⁴ Ibn Jawzī however was against *bid'ā* or innovation of the tradition through improper preaching. He saw *bid'ā* as compromising the knowledge of the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr*, which would lead to moral degradation.¹⁵⁵ The intent of the medieval sermons was to uphold morality. Since preaching and storytelling were related rhetoric genres, *bid'ā* was perceived to have no place in *ʿilm* because traditionally it was not related to the Prophet's *Sunna*.

Ibn al-Jawzī takes a socio-analytic perspective of *bid'ā*. In *Talbīs Iblīs*, a later work than *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa'l mudhakkirīn*, Ibn Jawzī associated *bid'ā* with social schism - the master project of *Iblīs* (the chief devil). A prime example of this schism from his perspective was the existence of seventy-two Jewish sects; each sect had its own innovation.¹⁵⁶ Any innovation which proved to be new and unrelated to anything the Prophet had or did was considered a threat to the Islamic community. Hence the remedy for *bid'ā* became the unquestionable *Sunna* of the Prophet.

The Sunnī *ʿulamā'* faced important challenges in the induction of religious Islam into the psyche of the common people.¹⁵⁷ Some rituals, like the feast of the Prophet's birth (*mawlid al-nabī*), were not in the *Shari'ā*. This particular feast encouraged both genders to gather in one place, a situation which was not well

¹⁵⁴ See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, 42-92. This is an important text because it also serves as a mini biographical dictionary of key preachers like ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, Wahb b. Munabbih, Qatādat, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, some of whom are quoted in the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* genre. At the beginning of his book, Ibn al-Jawzī classifies preaching by three terms: *qāṣṣ* (narrate), *dhikr* (remind), and *wa'iz* (admonish). All three speak of the intricate scale of preaching seeped in a tradition which balances tales of the past prophets, Qur'ānic recitation and morality. Preaching, at least in theory, had become in medieval Islam a systematic approach to the Qur'ān and a way to win new converts. With organized rules for sermons, preaching became another means to organize information, in addition to biographical dictionaries and *qīṣaṣ* of the prophets. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, 13-27.

¹⁵⁵ Ibn al-Jawzī's *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, 61.

¹⁵⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs* (Egypt: Idarat al-Ṭibā'ā al-Manariyat, 1947), 7.

¹⁵⁷ Berkey, *Formation of Islam*, 250.

accepted socially and was actually considered to be a threat to the male hierarchy in Islam. In addition, many popular preachers were not properly trained in the tradition and were unable to deliver sermons that authentically transmitted *‘ilm*. Tales of ancient prophets – *al-Isra’iliyyāt* - were selected as sermon topics by popular preachers without proper supervision from the *‘ulamā’*.¹⁵⁸

The *qīṣaṣ* of al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī do not seem to fall under the influence of the *bidaʿ*, given their careful use of *isnād* and the centrality of the Prophet Muḥammad. Yet the absence of *bidaʿ* does not mean that different authors of the tales neither had to write the exact same narrative detail nor use the same sources. Rather, their narratives organize the information of ancient prophets to cater to the spiritual needs of their audiences and to satisfy the social hunger for *‘ilm*. The fear which the *‘ulamā’* had of the popular preachers indicates how the tales of the prophets were of such importance to the Sunnī Muslims that a well-organised corpus about them was indispensable. Hence, the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* were reliable responses to the fallacies of popular preaching, at least from the Sunnī perspective.

1.5 Preliminary narrative accounts of Joseph, David and Solomon

Before moving to Chapter two, it is important to give a summary of the stories of Joseph, David and Solomon as narrated by both al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī; the footnotes will give details in al-Thaʿlabī not found in al-Ṭabarī.

¹⁵⁸See Camilla Adang, *Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. From Ibn Rabbān to Ibn Ḥazm* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 9. She makes a subtle distinction between *Isra’iliyyāt* and *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*. The *Isra’iliyyāt* keep the ancient prophets in their Hebrew contexts while *qīṣaṣ* adapted their tales into Islamic contexts.

1.5.1 The Story of Joseph in al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī

In the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*² Joseph is a prophet, well loved by his ageing father and prophet, Jacob, who is also the son of Rachel, the legitimate wife of Jacob. Joseph has ten half-brothers, all of whom are older than him. At the end of the narrative, he realises that he has a younger brother, Benjamin, who is much loved by his father.

At the beginning of Joseph's story¹⁵⁹, he loses his mother at a very young age and is brought up by his paternal aunt. She becomes very affectionate towards him to the extent of possessiveness. His father likewise, so that after a while he demands that his sister bring Joseph back to his household. She initially resists but promises to get back to him with her final decision. Meanwhile she plans a deception which will justify keeping Joseph under her care. She hides the belt of his prophetic ancestry of Isaac beneath Joseph's clothing; then she claims to her household that the sacred belt is missing. Upon conducting a search for the belt in her house, the belt is found on Joseph who is blamed for stealing it. This grants her the right to keep him under her care; Jacob accepts that Joseph will stay with her. However, the aunt eventually dies while Joseph is still young and he moves into Jacob's house.

Jacob's affections for Joseph result in jealousy from his half brothers. Meanwhile Joseph starts to have dreams which he shares with his father. These dreams alarm Jacob for a while and convince him that his son is a prophet. He wants to protect him from his brothers in case they hear of these dreams. Eventually news of the dreams reaches them and fuels their anger, causing their jealousy to escalate;

¹⁵⁹ In al-Thaʿlabī's narrative, Joseph is described as the one who has two-thirds of the beauty of Adam when he was first created and prior to his sin. The author alludes to the fact that this beauty was first seen by the Prophet Muḥammad during his mystical journey, *al-miʿrāj*, to the seven heavens.

so they plot to get rid of Joseph. One of Joseph's dreams entails the cosmos of eleven stars and the sun bowing to him; another one (in al-Tha[°]labī only) pertains to his superiority as the chosen one amongst his brothers because each one of them has a tree planted upon his birth; only Joseph's tree grows to heaven whilst his brothers' wither. The half brothers fear that Joseph will enslave them in the near future and their jealousy spurs them on to dispense with Joseph.

The half brothers approach Jacob with a proposal to take Joseph with them into the desert for a picnic. Initially Jacob hesitates to give permission for Joseph to go, lest he gets hurt or killed by a wolf in the desert. The brothers in turn promise his protection under their care. Jacob at last grants leave for the picnic. In the desert and out of sight of Jacob, the half brothers start to abuse Joseph through insults and beating. They almost kill him until one of the brothers, Judah, reminds them of an oath they have made earlier not to kill him. After they strip him of his shirt, they throw him into a well. Inside the well, Joseph weeps and asks for his shirt back but they mock him instead and start to plan what to do next.¹⁶⁰ They go back home wailing and weeping to Jacob before they break the news that Joseph has died after being attacked by a wolf. Jacob reacts to the news by trusting in God that eventually he will know the whole truth (al-Ṭabarī) but in al-Tha[°]labī Jacob greatly grieves for Joseph. He implicitly suspects his sons' plan against Joseph.

The next day, the half brothers sell Joseph to a passing caravan and bring the torn shirt with wolf blood on it to their father as proof of the fatal accident. Jacob's

¹⁶⁰ Al-Tha[°]labī gives more details about the scene inside the well. An angel appears to Joseph and clothes him with a shirt from heaven which belonged to the prophet Abraham. He also teaches him to pray, while the well is lit by the light of Joseph's presence. Even the water in the well becomes sweet to refresh Joseph.

grief intensifies.¹⁶¹ The caravan takes Joseph to Egypt where he is sold to a ruling king of Egypt. The king in turn gives the boy to his wife, Ra'īl, to take care of him in case he may be of benefit to them in the future. Joseph grows under her care and she becomes fond of him. As a young man she tries to seduce him once, but Jacob appears to him warning against fornication¹⁶²; quickly, he tries to escape from her but she pursues him and tears the shirt from his back. At this very moment, they are discovered by her husband and a relative of hers. Ra'īl immediately defends herself saying that Joseph has just tried to attack her but he denies the accusation. However, he is partly vindicated by the torn shirt on his back suggesting that it is he who is attacked; she is put under house arrest but in turn she exerts her influence on her husband to throw Joseph into prison where he remains for seven years.

Whilst in prison, Joseph is found to have a talent for interpreting the dreams of others. He interprets the dreams of two other inmates who are accused of attempting to kill the king. One of them is released earlier from prison and once again he serves the king. The king of Egypt also dreams of seven well fed cows and seven lean ones. It disturbs the king and no one in the court can help him understand his dream. The former inmate remembers to mention the name of Joseph to the king. The king gives permission to consult with Joseph. The king is impressed by the interpretation and sends for Joseph from prison. Joseph asks first to be vindicated completely of his guilt before meeting the king lest he recognise him as the one who allegedly attacked his spouse. So the king consults the women friends of Ra'īl who

¹⁶¹ In al-Tha'labī, the wolf is brought to Jacob and the two have a conversation in which the wolf denies killing Joseph because it is an abomination to eat the flesh of a prophet.

¹⁶² Al-Tha'labī gives a detailed, sensual account of her seductive attempt to which Joseph almost consents, but in that moment Jacob appears to him and with his hand pokes Joseph's breast to warn him against fornication and foolishness.

knew Joseph before the incident; they proclaim his innocence and beauty to the king. Joseph is vindicated. He finally meets the king who admires him from then onwards.

Joseph's interpretation of the king's dream warns of seven years of prosperity to be followed by seven years of famine in Egypt. So preparation needs to be made in times of prosperity in order to weather the forthcoming disaster. The king wonders who could supervise this preparation and Joseph offers his services to manage the crops of Egypt before the disaster unfolds. He does perfectly well and stores grain for the coming catastrophe. The king offers him his kingdom¹⁶³ and upon his death, Joseph marries Ra'îl. Joseph becomes ruler of all Egypt. Meanwhile in Canaan Jacob's family suffers the calamity of famine and he sends his ten sons to Egypt because they have heard that Egypt has food. Upon approaching Joseph, they do not recognise him but he recognises them. He questions the intention of their visit and the background of their family. Upon learning of a younger brother, Benjamin, left behind with Jacob, Joseph demands that they bring him to Egypt in exchange for food. They hesitate in case it inflames their father's grief over Joseph. Eventually they agree to bring him to Joseph. When Benjamin arrives in Egypt, Joseph takes him aside and tells him that he is Joseph, his full brother. The other half brothers still do not know that he is Joseph whom they got rid of some years before.

As they return to Jacob, Joseph prepares a plan to keep Benjamin behind. He secretly places his own measuring cup in his saddle. On their way back, Joseph sends some soldiers to claim back the missing measuring cup. The brothers deny that they have taken it. Upon searching it is found with Benjamin. The half brothers blame Benjamin for his deeds but he retorts, reminding them of the evil they did to Joseph

¹⁶³ Al-Tha'labî inserts the detail that Joseph was crowned as the new king of Egypt in the presence of the current king who bows to Joseph during the coronation.

years before. Benjamin is kept behind with Joseph – because a thief once caught becomes the property of the one who has been stolen from - whilst the other brothers go back with the food to Jacob. Upon learning that Benjamin is being kept behind in Egypt, Jacob is once again inflamed with grief which reminds him once more of the loss of Joseph. His grief intensifies and he loses his eyesight. But Joseph has sent his own shirt along with his half-brothers and it carries his scent.¹⁶⁴ Jacob puts it on his eyes and his eyesight is restored. This tells him that Joseph is still alive. All of Jacob's household immigrates to Egypt and rejoins Joseph. The half brothers bow to him as the first dream predicted.

1.5.2 The story of David in al-Tabarī and al-Tha'labī

David is also a prophet in the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. He is the youngest son of Jesse, originally a shepherd, small in stature and unimpressive in physique. There is a king in Israel named Saul who cannot face an enemy, a giant by the name of Goliath. The latter is a brute and has spread fear amongst the Israelites. Meanwhile Saul disobeys God in one of the battles and accordingly the ageing prophet Samuel is sent to find a new king for the Israelites. Samuel is led by God to Jesse to seek a new king. Jesse shows him all his sons except David. Samuel puts his horn of oil on the head of each one of them but each time the horn is not overflowing, a required sign to identify prophets. Then Samuel asks Jesse if he has other sons, and Jesse replies that there is David working in the field and caring for the sheep. Samuel seeks him out there and when he puts the horn on his head it overflows. So David is chosen as the new king for the Israelites. As a young boy, David is endowed with the gift of

¹⁶⁴ In al-Tha'labī's narrative, the shirt has the scent of heaven.

singing the psalms and even attracts other creatures when he sings in the wilderness.¹⁶⁵

Saul asks David to kill Goliath and in return he will give him his daughter's hand in marriage and allow him to manage the affairs of his kingdom. David then faces Goliath with a sling and a few stones. Goliath is a much bigger man with an enormous army behind him. He mocks David for his small stature and suggests that he go away lest he be killed. David in return replies that he is there to fight and kill him. In no time, with his sling he kills Goliath as the stone hits his forehead. Goliath falls down dead.¹⁶⁶ The people of Israel delight in David's courage against their enemy. David's popularity grows so that it stirs jealousy in Saul because the people start to see in David the long awaited leader and protector. Saul henceforth plans to kill David and put an end to his popularity. He fails after several attempts. Then Saul kills all scholars in Israel who support David's leadership; only one woman scholar is spared by one of his commanders. Saul later laments his actions.

The repentant Saul goes to old Samuel who advises him to seek the wisdom of scholars among the Israelites. Since only one woman scholar is left in Israel, he goes to her and she reluctantly sends him to the tomb of the prophet Isaac to call upon his spirit. Saul does this and the spirit of Isaac advises him to start living as a *jihādī* to promote Islam across the nations. He gets martyred in the process.

David has become the sole governor and king of all the Israelites. He has secured the Israelites from outside threats, and he already has ninety-nine wives. He spends his days systematically between worship, the affairs of the kingdom and his wives. During his worship days he reads about ancient prophets and he admires their

¹⁶⁵ Al-Tha'labī adds in his narrative of Solomon that David has a heart which heals others.

¹⁶⁶ In al-Tha'labī's account, even the army standing behind Goliath also gets killed.

trials of which he has none. So he prays to God asking to be as great as his prophetic ancestry by similar trial. God warns him to be on guard. On one of his worship days, a golden sparrow appears in his room. He tries to catch it but the bird keeps hopping around leading David to see a woman bathing alone. He lusts for her because of her beauty and enquires about her. Once he knows that she is a wife of one of his army commanders, Uriah, David sends him away deliberately into difficult battles until he is killed. Then he marries Uriah's wife.

Shortly after and during worship, two litigants appear to David asking him to be the arbitrator between them. One of them has one ewe which is taken from him by the other who already owns ninety-nine ewes. David judges in favour of the one who has lost his only ewe. At this instant, David realises his error in taking Uriah's wife given that he already has ninety-nine wives. David spends his days in lament¹⁶⁷ and fearful of the Last Judgement. His people lose some respect for David, though he remains a king;¹⁶⁸ consequently, God forbids him to build the temple because of his crime against Uriah in order to acquire his spouse. Eventually God forgives him. When David dies, his son Solomon assumes the throne.

1.5.3 The story of Solomon in al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī

The *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* contains separate accounts in the life episodes of the prophet Solomon. He is a promising figure of wisdom from an early age, perceptive in giving sound judgement and he even supersedes his father, David, in this role. His ability to communicate and speak the languages of other creatures, such as birds, is

¹⁶⁷ Al-Thaʿlabī gives a drama of David's lamentation which lasts for thirty years in comparison to al-Ṭabarī's forty days.

¹⁶⁸ In Thaʿlabī David remains a ruler but his efforts are all wasted in perpetual lamentation and fear of God's judgment.

part of his strong persona¹⁶⁹. Such a skill gives Solomon the power to command not just the human subjects of his kingdom, but also birds, *jinn*, and devils. All of them are under his command. Solomon in this regard stands out among other ancient prophets and his power extends over all creatures. Because of this ability, Solomon manages to build a gigantic temple as decreed by God. After the temple is built, Solomon travels across the Arabian Desert.

In one of the narrative episodes, Solomon has a mobile throne which flies across the Arabian Desert to seek new territories for Islam. This is his prophetic function to spread his faith to other existing monarchies. His flying throne is accompanied by *jinn*, birds and devils all of whom are attentive to his commands upon request. One of the birds, a hoopoe, takes flight ahead of Solomon to a new territory, Yemen, where he descends and meets another hoopoe of his kind. They exchange information about their governors, Solomon the prophet and Bilqīs the Queen of Sheba in Yemen. Neither hoopoe previously has heard of the other's ruler.

Meanwhile, Solomon asks for water while flying over the desert – required for ablution before prayer. None of the *jinn* or the devils can help find water in the desert; one of the *jinn* recommends to Solomon that he consult with the hoopoe which has the ability to spot hidden water under the surface of the desert. Upon realising that the hoopoe is not amongst them, Solomon vows to put him to death by plucking out his feathers and leaving him unprotected under the desert sun, unless the hoopoe can give a justified reason for his absence.

¹⁶⁹ Al-Tha'labī in particular portrays Solomon with a heart of wisdom of which he is reminded when he has a dialogue with one of the ants in the valley of their colonies. The lame ant reminds him of humility and respect to others given his status as king. The ant is never mentioned in al-Ṭabarī's Solomon.

As Solomon's hoopoe begins his return to the flying throne, he is met by other birds and *jinn* who warn him of Solomon's intention to kill him. The hoopoe, however, meets Solomon with the news of a new monarchy in Sheba whose queen is of enormous power and influence. He spares his hoopoe from his fateful death and he sets out to write a noble letter to Queen Bilqīs inviting her to embrace Islam without resistance. This letter contains a quote from the Qur'ān, and it is delivered to her chamber by Solomon's hoopoe.

Upon receiving the noble letter, Bilqīs calls for her advisors because she perceives behind the letter the great authority of either another king or of a prophet. If a king, then she has to conquer him since kings enter new territories to inflict damage, but if a prophet then Solomon is of God and worthy of being listened to. Queen Bilqīs masterminds a scheme to send gifts to Solomon in order to test if he is a prophet or not; a prophet will not accept the gifts from another monarchy lest he be lured by worldly affairs. As expected, Solomon does not accept the queen's gifts and he returns them all to her. This prompts her to pay him a visit as soon as she realises his prophetic nature as a ruler.

Leaving behind in Sheba her well kept throne, she approaches Solomon in the desert and camps beside him with her army and advisors. As Solomon sees this, he asks the devils to bring her throne before him, prior to her arrival. This is what happens. Solomon tests her honesty by watching to see if she recognises her throne before him. She does not deny that it is hers.

In return she asks him a wise question about the source of sweet water which is neither from earth nor from heaven- the *jinn* helps Solomon to answer. He answers the queen that the water in question is from the sweat of horses. She recognises his

wisdom. He hears another question about the nature/colour of God which makes him step down from the throne and bow to the ground as if in a trance; when the angels ask him to sit again on the throne he realises that this question has not been asked by the queen, rather by the devil to confuse him.

Bilqīs embraces Islam and depending on the source of information¹⁷⁰ she either marries Solomon who commands the devils to build her a glass castle, or marries another king, Ḥamdān who becomes the king of Yemen. In either case, she has become a faithful Muslim.

Another episode of narration common in al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī's writing about Solomon is his invasion of the kingdom of Sidon where he kills its king and marries his beautiful daughter by the name of Jarādah. She becomes a Muslim but not out of conviction; she misses the presence of her father and her sadness is palpable to Solomon. When he asks her about her depression, she shares with him how much she misses her father. He tries to console her that she has now a great kingdom and a new faith which outweigh her loss. Jarādah asks Solomon to command the devils to build a statue of her father as a consolation to her grief. He agrees and gives the command to this effect. She clothes the statue with her father's clothes to appear exactly as she has known him. In turn, she develops secretly a daily ritual of worship before the statue of her father. After a while, she is spotted by one of Solomon's senior court advisors.

¹⁷⁰ Al-Ṭabarī gives two accounts about what happened to Bilqīs after she embraces Islam; according to the account of Ibn ʿAbbās, she marries Solomon. But al-Ṭabarī also mentions Wahb b. Munabbih's account that Bilqīs marries Dhū Tubbuʿ the king Ḥamdān with the consent of Solomon before she and her new husband go back to Yemen. See *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 292 / *History*, volume 3, 163-64. Al-Thaʿlabī uses the same accounts of Ibn ʿAbbās and the Prophet Muhammad that Bilqīs marries Solomon, while Munabbih's account affirms her marriage to the king of Ḥamdān; see his *ʿArāʾis*, 321/ *Tales of the Prophets*, 536.

One day, this senior advisor makes a farewell speech about the greatness of all prophets. When he speaks about Solomon, he only refers to his greatness during his adolescence rather than his adulthood. After the ceremony is over, Solomon angrily questions the omission in the speech of the achievement of his adult years. It is then that the advisor informs him that his Jarādah worships an idol at home in the image of her father rather than God. Solomon then abolishes all idolatry at home and punishes his wife. Consequently he performs rituals of penance asking God to accept once again David's household as worthy of the prophetic call.

While having a bath, Solomon leaves his own ring of his kingdom with one of his trusted wives. The devil, Şakhr, changes his body to look exactly like Solomon; while Solomon is bathing, Şakhr appears to the trusted wife and asks for the ring. Thinking that it is Solomon, Şakhr is given the ring and puts it on one of his fingers. At this moment, the appearance of the real Solomon is changed, so that no one recognises him as the authentic king. He becomes exiled in his own kingdom and hires himself out to work amongst the fishermen on the coast. Solomon's daily wage is two fishes, one for his consumption and the other he sells to secure his daily needs. Meanwhile, Şakhr as governor of Solomon's kingdom starts to abuse his authority over his people and Solomon's wives. The people start to notice the lack of justice at his hands and begin to question their ruler amongst themselves. When the truth begins to emerge, Şakhr quickly flies (as if he is a bird) over the sea and drops Solomon's ring to be lost forever. This ring is swallowed by a fish which is caught and by chance this fish is given to Solomon as part of his daily wage. He slits open it and he finds his ring. As soon as he puts the ring on his finger, he is once again recognised as Solomon the king. He regains his kingdom and captures Şakhr to

imprison him inside a box made of rock which is dropped deep into the sea. This is why Şakhr is known as the companion of the sea.

1.6 Concluding thoughts

There are several points which justify the *qiṣaṣ* in the category of *adab* or prose-writing. The *qiṣaṣ* claim the past for Islam not just for telling a nice story (entertainment) or recounting the past, but for instructing (pedagogical literature). The *qiṣaṣ* target all social classes, though the audience of the *qiṣaṣ* told in popular preaching may differ from those written by the *‘ulamā’*. Lastly, the major point of *qiṣaṣ* as part of the *adab* genre depends on manifesting the socio-political issues which authors want to address with their audience, because they address issues of faith as well as proper conduct; hence they deserve to be treated as *adab* rather than just narrative expressions of *‘ilm* (specialised or religious knowledge).

The word *adab* has basically a two-fold meaning: social etiquette and/or written prose. In this chapter I make the connection between *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* and *adab*-prose. Both writings are capable of conveying social values from the past to address the needs of the author’s particular audience. There were two impacts on medieval writing. The first impact was the Muslim vision of the past as universal history heralded by prophets, and the second was the Muslim organisation of knowledge to present a narrative meaning of being a Muslim in the world (function of biographical dictionaries); and the second was to preserve the authenticity of sources already expressed in the *ḥadīth*. Since Biblical prophets in the *qiṣaṣ* were interpreted as Muslims, the *qiṣaṣ* adapt the past to the Islamic context of the present.

As a result, the tales contributed to the overall transmission of knowledge of Islamic values and pre-Islamic cultural norms.

Yet, the modern meaning of *adab* as literature is too general for the *qiṣaṣ*; the *qiṣaṣ* are specific writings (*selectivity*) about ancient prophets as seen through the Qurʾānic lens and rely on the *ḥadīth* resources. In this way they remain religious writing but they function as *adab*-prose because they integrate the past into a present context. The *qiṣaṣ* are also near to the *sīra* genre because they share with the *sīra* the spiritual make-up of prophets and unfold the social piety and aspiration of the times when they were compiled. They also share similar features in the writing of biographies such as *motivation* and, as mentioned above, the *selectivity* of subjects.

The spread of the *qiṣaṣ* is indebted to popular preaching despite the concern of ‘*ulamāʾ*’ against the level of accuracy and knowledge transmitted by those preachers. Popular preachers delivered some contents of the *qiṣaṣ* to their audiences. However, the concern for authenticity plays a secondary role to the lessons delivered by the contents of the *qiṣaṣ*. Popular preaching still contributed to the ethical formation of the masses. It is hardly fair to dismiss how the masses considered these *qiṣaṣ* which they heard from popular preachers as true for their spiritual formation. The bottom line remains essentially true: story-telling and story-writing were effective means for promoting the religiously good society. In this respect, the *qiṣaṣ* can be considered instructive *adab* to all members of the society in matters of faith and proper conduct. The *qiṣaṣ* function as *adab*.

Even though in the tenth century, religious writing and *adab* prose writing were not yet accepted as one, it seems that the *qiṣaṣ* could be viewed anew in both camps. Al-Jāḥiẓ’s perspective that *adab*-prose is essentially transmitting what is to

be socially adapted includes the function of the *qiṣaṣ*. Granted, the *qiṣaṣ* are religious in content and goal, but they also include social themes like fidelity, heroism, military tactics, political authority, human vulnerability and leadership. Religious and prose writing were not always considered a good mix in the tenth century, lest Islamic values be affected by worldly issues. But the *qiṣaṣ*, as will become clear in the following chapters do manifest socio-political issues along with the religious portrayal of prophets.

Chapter Two

2.0 The Historical Context

2.1 Preliminary thoughts

Mez described tenth-century Islam as a renaissance characterised by its significant literary production, political development and an expanding civilisation.¹⁷¹ This positive assessment should not mislead us to the challenges which occurred during the ninth and the tenth centuries against the central power in Baghdād. The political status of the caliphate in Baghdād was not stable during the life period of al-Ṭabarī (838-923/223-310). It was a period marked with the decline of the °Abbāsid caliphal power in maintaining its legitimacy over the entire Islamic empire. In light of this decline, the historical detail of the times of al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha°labī will be covered in this chapter. In the following sections of 2.1.1-3, I will lay out the context in which al-Ṭabarī lived, mainly the topography of the Baghdād and its sectarian milieu in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. It is only in the sections of 2.2.4-6, I will then seek to insert al-Ṭabarī's trajectory into this context. I will do the same with al-Tha°labī in the following sections of 2.3.5.

The social, religious and political environments of the two cities, Baghdād and Nīshāpūr in the tenth-century Muslim world, help us to understand the cultural influences on al-Ṭabarī in Baghdād, and al-Tha°labī in Nīshāpūr . Both were Persians, masters of Arabic, devout Sunnīs, experts in the *ḥadīth* sciences, commentators and esteemed readers of the Qur'ān, teachers of Sunnī jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and preachers of the Muslim faith. They wrote on Biblical Prophets at a time when leadership in medieval Islam was no longer effectively in the hands of the

¹⁷¹ Adam Mez, *The renaissance of Islam*, translated by Ṣalāḥuddīn Khuda Bukhsh and D.S. Margoliouth (London: Luzac & Co, 1937), 11- 13.

caliph. My hypothesis is that their tales of the prophets were written to give advice to the caliphs or those in leadership. The influence of these tales would have an effect far beyond the geographical limitations of the two cities of Baghdād and Nīshāpūr.

Al-Ṭabarī's Baghdād and al-Thaʿlabī's Nīshāpūr under the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty presented very different political and religious contexts. The political power of the empire was centred in Baghdād, and thus al-Ṭabarī's perspective on politics and religion was the view from the centre. In contrast, Nīshāpūr, where al-Thaʿlabī lived, was at the eastern end of the empire in the Persian province of Khurāsān, and so he brings to his writings the view from the edge.¹⁷² Both cities promoted the cause of what later became known as Sunnī Islam from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. The *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*³ were important contributions to this development, offering perspectives from both the centre and the periphery. Each city possessed a distinct culture, eminent figures, rival religious movements, different theological orientations and Sunnī legal schools, all of which contributed to a perspective of a prophetic history.

This chapter provides an overview of the topologies of the two cities and their historical contexts to shed more light on the leadership of the prophets in the narrative tales. Prior to the tenth century, the caliphate and the *imāmate* were, in theory, the two ideals of Islamic leadership Muslims expected from their leaders, as characterised by their religious and political responsibilities.¹⁷³ The tenth century challenged the ideal of the caliphate. In 945/333 the Būyids invaded Baghdād.

¹⁷² As mentioned in the "Introduction", I am borrowing these views from R. Bulliet's *Islam, the view from the edge*.

¹⁷³ As the caliphal power was declining in the tenth century, the rising ʿulamāʾ promoted the *Sunna* as the binding factor for all Muslims (including caliphs). See P. Crone and M. Hinds *God's caliph: religious authority in the first centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 50-68.

Although they were sympathetic to the Twelvers Shī'ī, they tolerated the Sunnī 'ulamā' and their caliph. The 'ulamā', since the time of the *Mihna* (which ended in 847/232), successfully took over the religious leadership once entrusted to the caliphate. The Būyids were a rough Iranian military group from the Daylamite mountainous region, and originally they were probably Zaydī Shī'ites but became oriented to Twelvers Shī'ī once they were in Baghdād. The disappearance of the Twelfth *Imām* in 873/259 contributed to this confusion of leadership, but the Būyids allowed religious and intellectual activities to take their courses.¹⁷⁴ However, the Būyids did not solve the problem of leadership as a whole, since between the tenth and eleventh century the growth in intellectual rigour due to the works of the *udabā'*, 'ulamā', Ṣūfīs, and Muslim Hellenistic philosophers stimulated a desire for a new and more enlightened leadership. These new ideas were not in harmony, each factor claiming its own version of absolute truth.¹⁷⁵

The time of al-Ṭabarī in Baghdād was not free from Shī'ī activities in the empire, particularly from the Twelvers Shī'īs and their political thought on the *imāmate*¹⁷⁶ which left an influence on shaping Muslim leadership. The Shī'ites wanted originally to restore the political rights to the *ahl-al-bayt* – the Prophet Muḥammad's household for the empire – but their goal proved excessively

¹⁷⁴ Marshall Hodgson, "The Būyid era", in *Expectations of the millennium. Shī'ism in history*, edited by Seyyed H. Nasr et al (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 154.

¹⁷⁵ Marshall Hodgson, *The venture*, volume 2, 153.

¹⁷⁶ Patricia Crone traces the problem of the caliphate succession and its counterpart theory of the *imāmate* prior to the tenth-century. Her book is a study on Islamic governance and the tension between the 'Alids, Zaydīs, Twelvers, Fāṭimids and the Sunnī caliphate, each of whom had ideas on leadership and legitimacy. With the Twelvers, the support for religious leadership was gaining momentum during al-Ṭabarī's time: an *imām* was expected to be pure from sin and infallible, able to explain the inner meaning of the Qur'ān. See P. Crone *Medieval Islamic political thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 51-125.

ambitious.¹⁷⁷ Meanwhile in 897/284 the Zaydī Shīʿī established themselves in Yemen.¹⁷⁸ There were also the Ṭulūnids (Sunnīs) who restored temporarily the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate legitimacy over Egypt between 868/254 and 905/292.¹⁷⁹ Shortly after, in 809/193, the Fāṭimids supported by the Ismāʿīlī Shīʿism appeared in North Africa (Tunisia and then Egypt).¹⁸⁰ It was after forty-six years of al-Ṭabarī's death that the Fāṭimids became a ruling dynasty in 969/358 with an independent Shīʿī caliphate rivalling the Sunnī caliphate in Baghdād. This is not to forget that the invasion of the Būyids Shīʿīs from Iran to the city of Baghdād in 945/333 restricting drastically the caliphal political power even for local issues. Therefore, between the late ninth to the early eleventh century, during al-Ṭabarī's time in Baghdād and shortly after his death, there emerged a number of independent kingdoms (both Sunnī and Shīʿī) at the edge of the former empire – like the Ṭulūnids in Egypt, Būyids in western Iran and Zaydīs in Yemen. It is within this historical context that we begin to examine the lives of our two medieval Sunnī authors.

2.2 A view from the centre

2.2.1 The regional structure of Baghdād: the caliphal city

The word *Baghdād* can be traced back to the time of Ḥammurabī's code in 1800 BCE, where the inscription *Baghdādu* appears, well before any Persian influence.¹⁸¹ Later, in the eighth-century BCE, the Persians used the word *Bagh* to

¹⁷⁷ Muḥammad Qāsim Zamān, "Religion and politics under the early ʿAbbāsīds", in *Islamic history and civilization*, edited by Ulrich Haarmann and Wadād al-Qāḍī, volume 16 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 34.

¹⁷⁸ Hodgson, *The venture* volume 1, 494.

¹⁷⁹ Hodgson, *The venture*, volume 1, 493-494

¹⁸⁰ Hodgson, *The venture*, volume 1, 489.

¹⁸¹ A.A. Duri, "Baghdād", in *EF*², volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 894.

denote God.¹⁸² Yāqūt, in his geographical dictionary, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, adds to the etymology; he offers different explanations for the term *Bāgh*: a “garden,” as conceived by a man named *dād*, and therefore Baghdād could be a man’s garden; or a name of an idol; or a region where the Muslim city of Baghdād eventually was built;¹⁸³ it also could have been the name given to an area of commercial international trade not far from the Euphrates and the Tigris, for even the Chinese traders referred to the king of the area as *Bāgh*.¹⁸⁴ It is hard therefore to determine with any certainty the derivation of the word.

Damascus was the political capital of the Umayyads, but by the end of their dynasty in 750/132 a new capital was needed for the emerging ʿAbbāsīd dynasty. After living under the threat of the rebellious ʿAlīds in Kūfa, the second ʿAbbāsīd Caliph al-Manṣūr (d.775/158)¹⁸⁵ decided to build the city of Baghdād to represent his government.¹⁸⁶ Al-Manṣūr called his new city *Madīnat al-salām* because it rested on

¹⁸² Duri, “Baghdād”, 894. In Persian “Bāgh” also means garden. So given the variety of meaning attached to this term it is hard to tell for certain the exact meaning of Baghdād. See G. Le Strange *Baghdād during the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1900), 10.

¹⁸³ Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, edited by Muḥammad Amīn al-Khanjī and Aḥmad bin al-Amīn al-Shanqīṭī (Cairo: Matbaʿat al-Saʿadat, 1906) volume 1 & 2, 230.

¹⁸⁴ Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 231.

¹⁸⁵ When al-Ṭabarī took permanent residency in Baghdād in 870/256, the city was already over a hundred years old. Caliph al-Manṣūr wanted a new theocratic centre for imperial Islam, and he chose to construct a new city away from the rebellious Persian settlements but close to a trade route already active in the area of the Tigris River. Baghdād was completed by 767/150; three years after, al-Manṣūr’s palace and mosque were built at the very centre of the city with its four gates. It was not the first Islamic city to be round in shape but Baghdād was designed to protect itself from outside intruders from the cities of Kūfa and Baṣra. It seems then that the original purpose of Baghdād was also to be as a city-fortress. Though al-Manṣūr called his city *Madīnat al-Salām* – city of peace – ironically the times were turbulent and it was necessary to build a fortified city to protect it from the conflicts in its jurisdiction. See Yāqūt *Muʿjam al-buldān*, volume 1, 230-237.

¹⁸⁶ Duri, “Baghdād”, 894.

the river Tigris in a valley of peace – *wādī al-salām*.¹⁸⁷ In this region, the land was fertile and was referred to as Sawād which in Arabic means black soil.¹⁸⁸

The city of Baghdād was originally constructed in 766/149 to reflect the social ideologies of its time. At the very centre of the city stood the Golden Palace with its green dome capped with a statue of a mounted horseman.¹⁸⁹ A mosque for the exclusive use of the Caliph had been built next to it,¹⁹⁰ which suggests a close link between the caliphate and religion. The city was originally built in a circle and was encircled by three protective walls (outer, main and inner).¹⁹¹ Different social classes occupied different quarters of the city. The area immediately outside the outer walls was designated for commercial use, public buildings such as mosques, and the military. The map in Le Strange's book illustrates well the purpose of that exterior area during the reign of the Caliph al-Manṣūr.¹⁹² It shows that the city had four main gates equidistant from one another, each gate was named after a city or a region: Baṣra gate (southeast), Khurāsān gate (northeast), Syrian gate (northwest), and Kūfa gate (southwest). Each gate opened to an active commercial and residential neighbourhood. The Baṣra gate led to the Sharkiyya; the Karkh quarter (where the Shī'ite majority resided)¹⁹³ in the south occupied an extended area from the Baṣra

¹⁸⁷ Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, volume 1, 231. The city of Kūfa was built on the river banks of the Euphrates adjacent to the sand desert, while Baghdād was built on the fertile bank of the Tigris. See G. Le Strange, *Baghdād*, 7.

¹⁸⁸ Ulrika Mårtensson, "Ṭabarī", in *Makers of Islamic Civilization series* (Oxford centre for Islamic studies: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41.

¹⁸⁹ Duri, "Baghdād", 894.

¹⁹⁰ This mosque was divergent from the Qibla. Al-Ṭabarī *Ta'rikh*, volume 6, 265; see Ibn al-Athīr *al-Kamil fī l-Ta'rikh*, edited by Carolus Johannes Tornberg, volume 5 (Beirut L Dār Beirut, 1966), 439. Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd demolished and rebuilt it in 809/193 with bricks. Later it was enlarged in 875/261. See Duri, "Baghdād", 895; and G. Le Strange, *Baghdād*, 32-33.

¹⁹¹ In al-Khaṭīb's *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, the city was round according to Jacob Lassner. See J. Lassner *Khiṭaṭ Baghdād*, translated by Ṣāliḥ Aḥmad al-'Alī (Baghdād: Maṭba'at al-Jama' al-'ilmī al-'Iraqī, 1984), 30.

¹⁹² Le Strange, *Baghdād*, Map III, 47.

¹⁹³ Duri, "Baghdād", 899.

gate to the Kūfa gate. The Khurāsān gate opened to the eastern side of Tigris, Shammasiyya - an area which was developed later during Harūn's caliphate. The west side of the city was named al-Zarwā ('bent' in Arabic) because the river Tigris curved as it passed the city at that point.¹⁹⁴ The Syrian gate, by contrast, led to the troubled area of Ḥarbiyya in the northwest. It is interesting to note that the map of the city in Le Strange's book gives no details of an existing mosque in the Ḥarbiyya district. This could be due to the frequent riots and the strong military presence sent to guard the Syrian gate.

There was no particular significance to the naming of the gates of Baghdād. It was simply to highlight the different directions. The gates, the circular shape of the city, its location on the banks of the river Tigris to ease trade and travel, and the giant green dome of the Caliph's palace with its mounted horseman all speak to the glory of the ruler of a city originally built as a political symbol of a capital worthy of an empire which stretched in all directions from his city.

The same map shows that there were at least four mosques built during al-Manṣūr's reign. The Great Mosque stood inside the inner walls of the city next to the Golden Palace. The Musayyib Mosque stood just outside the Kūfan gate; another mosque, the Waḍḍāḥ, was located in Karkh and nearer to the eastern region. Another Great Mosque was built in the Sharkīyya region, a short distance from the walls. As mentioned earlier, the north-eastern region had no mosque until it was developed under the Caliph Harūn. From this map one infers that the mosques were located inside stable neighbourhoods. Craftsmen and spies from the regions of

¹⁹⁴ Le Strange, *Baghdād*, 11.

Khurāsān/Transoxiana lingered in the most troubled suburb of Ḥarbīyya.¹⁹⁵ Soldiers resided outside the outer wall to monitor the markets in Ḥarbīyya,¹⁹⁶ as they were essential to the economy of Baghdād and extended into the inner walls of the city. The city was well fortified to protect trade and commerce.¹⁹⁷ The initial structure of the city was more that of a fortress than a cosmopolitan city.

The Golden Palace was not the only palace built in Baghdād. In 773/156, al-Manṣūr built al-Khulūd with its garden just below the Khurāsān gate. Since the city was small in size, between 768/151 and 773/156 al-Manṣūr constructed a new region just outside the outer wall on the east side of Tigris, later called Ruṣāfa where later Harūn would build his own palace.¹⁹⁸ This eastern region would become an area of particular interest in the study of Baghdād for members of the caliphal family and the upper social class settled there. The Caliph Harūn had extended the eastern side of the city from the quarter of Shammasiyya to Mukharrim in the southeast. This alone made the area attractive to new residents, including the Barmakī vizier Jaʿfar (d.803/187), who had a palace built at the Shammasiyya gate. Likewise, Zubaydā (cousin and wife of Caliph Harūn and the mother of Caliph al-Amīn)¹⁹⁹ built a mosque named after her nearby on the Tigris.²⁰⁰ This indicates that the centre of power moved from the centre of Baghdād during al-Manṣūr's reign to the eastern side of the city, and by 786/169 both Caliph Ḥarūn and later his son Caliph al-Maʾmūn assumed power from there.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁵ Duri, "Baghdād", 897.

¹⁹⁶ Le Strange, *Baghdād*, Map II, 15.

¹⁹⁷ Duri, "Baghdād", 895.

¹⁹⁸ Duri, "Baghdād", 898.

¹⁹⁹ Kennedy, *When Baghdad*, 188.

²⁰⁰ Duri, "Baghdād", 898.

²⁰¹ Caliph al-Amīn, brother of Caliph al-Maʾmūn, stayed in the Golden palace in the main walled city until he was ousted by his brother. See Duri, "Baghdād", 898.

By the end of the caliphal reign of al-Ma'mūn's in 833/218, Baghdād was no longer a haven of security for the caliph. His Turkish guards were harassed by the people and for the sake of security, in 836/221 he moved the centre of power to Sāmarrā', a new location north of Baghdād, where it remained a refuge for the caliphs until 892/278.²⁰² During this period in Sāmarrā', the authority of the caliphs was constrained by their Turkish guards who were new converts to Islam.²⁰³ While the caliph resided in Sāmarrā', al-Ṭabarī took permanent residency in Baghdād, namely, in 870/256.

When the caliphal institution returned to Baghdād in 892/278, it brought with it a construction boom of royal palaces and mosques on the southeast side of Baghdād.²⁰⁴ The Ḥasnī Palace was effectively restored in 892/278; in the same year the al-Thurayyā and Firdaws Palaces were constructed. The Tāj Palace was finally completed in 902/289, followed by the equally flamboyant Tree Palace and the construction of the Greek Embassy in 908/295.²⁰⁵ But by 912/299, the Khulūd Palace of al-Manṣūr and the western wall of the city were demolished. The construction activity in the city continued until the arrival in Baghdād of the Būyids in 945/333.

The eighth to the thirteenth centuries in Baghdād saw²⁰⁶ numerous changes in leadership: the Caliph al-Ma'mūn who started the *Miḥna*; the tyranny of the Turkish guards, especially in Sāmarrā' between 836/221 and 892/278; the rule of the Būyids in Baghdād starting in 945/333; the rule of the Seljūks who replaced the Būyids from 1055/447 until the end of the twelfth century; and the gradual decline in leadership, culminating in the conquest by the Mongols in 1258/656 (the same year in which the

²⁰² Hugh Kennedy, *The courts of the caliphs* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), xvii.

²⁰³ See Yāqūt *Mu'jam al-buldān*, 230-237.

²⁰⁴ Le Strange, *Baghdād*, 317.

²⁰⁵ See Le Strange, *Baghdād*, xxix-xxxi.

²⁰⁶ Le Strange, *Baghdād*, 301-302.

last Caliph al-Musta^cṣim died). Baghdād continued as a significant city within the large but by now defunct and fragmented Muslim world; it never remained its imperial capital.²⁰⁷

2.2.2 The challenge of *ijmā*^c and the Ḥanbalī school in Baghdād

As the caliphs were losing their power in religious matters, religious leadership moved into the hands of the specialists or *‘ulamā*^ʿ. During the times of al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha^clabī, religious leadership began to take shape with the emergence of the Sunnī legal schools. The primacy of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the tension in theology (*kalām*) between the Mu^ctazilīs and the Ash^carīs affected the development of religious leadership. Consensus (*ijmā*^c) or collective judgment arising from a communal-minded Muslims was an important aspect of Sunnī religious leadership.²⁰⁸ The principle of *ijmā*^c - though it was not a canonical doctrine - was a crucial Sunnī development and represented a step towards religious independence from the Caliph’s control. *Ijmā*^c effectively became the voice of Sunnī orthodoxy, though there was no agreement how to conduct the consensus.²⁰⁹ Sunnī *ijmā*^c became an effective, authoritative voice of communal solidarity among

²⁰⁷ Lassner, *Khīṭaṭ Baghdād*, 27.

²⁰⁸ *Ijmā*^c is one of the Sunnī canonical sources of the sacred law juxtaposition to the Qur^ʿān, the *ḥadīth* and the exercise of analogy (*qiyās*). *Ijmā*^c and *qiyās* are more about methodology or approach to a legal case than content of a doctrine. *Ijmā*^c, however, is a juristic agreement, without any doubt or falsity, about what the tradition says regarding an issue in a certain context. *Ijmā*^c sets a legal opinion of a *qāḍī* at the same level of authority as the Qur^ʿān and the *ḥadīth*. *Qiyās* is finding a common factor between a new legal case with previous case(s) in order to transpose one juristic norm of a former case to the new one at hand. See Wā^ʿel B. Ḥallāq, *An introduction to the Islamic law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21-22.

²⁰⁹ Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and leadership in an early Islamic Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 21.

scholars of the law, leading and instructing Muslims in religious matters.²¹⁰ In comparison, *qiyās* is an exercise by a jurist who, using analogical reasoning, or precedent in legal cases, seeks to shed light on new issues in unique contexts.

Ḥanbalism was another influence in al-Ṭabarī's Baghdad. The Ḥanbalī movement favoured absolutely the authority of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* over that of *ahl-al-ra'y*²¹¹ (rational opinion), and hence, in a sense, of *ijmā'* over *ra'y*. The strength of Ḥanbalism was in its approach that solutions to social and religious problems were to be found in the *ḥadīth*.²¹² In essence the Ḥanbalīs were strengthening the role of *ahl al-ḥadīth* and the authority of the *ḥadīth* corpus to meet the communal needs of the *umma*. Ḥanbalism became a popular movement because it provided solutions from within the tradition, and cautioned the caliphs against what they considered to be too inclusive as *ijmā'*.²¹³ However, one should not exaggerate the Ḥanbalīs' efforts, for the intellectual force was in the hands of the more general movement of the traditionalists such as the *ahl al-ḥadīth* (who were not all Ḥanbalīs), and reoriented

²¹⁰ The caliphate for the traditionalists (Sunnīs) remained a symbol of unity and the seat of legitimate government despite the fact that the majority of the Sunnīs already had rejected caliphs as leaders on matters of religion. See Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and leadership*, 18.

²¹¹ There is a history of Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) starting with its formative period during which exegesis was linked to the development of the *ḥadīth* science. Shortly after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad and his close companions, the exegetical process involved the transmission of carefully collected *ḥadīth* sources – in short, *ḥadīth b-l ma'thūr*. The best example of its type, and the standard for subsequent *tafsīrs*, is al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* which transmits *khabar* – unit of information – with reliable chain sources. It stands in contrast to the alternative *tafsīr b-l ra'y* (speculative-based exegesis). After al-Ṭabarī's time, the classical period of *tafsīr* had these successive steps: the first premise is that the Qur'ān explains itself; clarity of words and obscure phrases is provided; word use and grammar are connected in Arabic and Qur'ānic usage of certain words; collective accounts of *ḥadīth* serve as contexts for revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) are elaborated; finally, occasional insights from the Prophet Muḥammad and/or his companions are also given. See Jane D. McAuliffe *Qur'ānic Christians* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13-30.

²¹² Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and leadership*, 24.

²¹³ Basically the Ḥanbalīs used the *ḥadīth* of the companions of the Prophet as the main source for consultation along with the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet to decide the process of *ijmā'*. Any other *ḥadīth* source was not accepted as legitimate for the Ḥanbalīs. This must have caused tension among some Muslims in Baghdad. The caliph was becoming annoyed at the Ḥanbalīs' aggressive imposition of their views on the faithful. They were warned that 'fire and sword' will pursue them if they persisted. See Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and leadership*, 25.

the Islamic tradition to focus on the sources of the Qurʾān and the Prophetic *ḥadīth*.²¹⁴ The Ḥanbalīs were not against all types of rationalism except that of the Muʿtazilīs.²¹⁵ However, Ibn Ḥanbal, the founder of the Ḥanbalī movement, never criticized Muʿtazilism for its stand on the creation of the Qurʾān. Rather he criticised the *Jahmiyya*.²¹⁶ The precepts of the *Jahmiyya* were unclear, but the Ḥanbalīs condemned any *Jahmite* who manifested Muʿtazilī orientation.

Ibn Ḥanbal did not seek to coerce his followers into accepting his ideas.²¹⁷ Perhaps the fact that he survived the crisis of the *Mihna*, has something to do with his realisation that coercion was not the ideal way to gain support. His followers were more aggressive in promoting popular Ḥanbalism. Al-Ṭabarī was not a Ḥanbalī in legal orientation but a Shāfiʿī, another prominent legal school in Baghdād.

In short, the Ḥanbalīs as strong proponents of traditionalism, contributed to the formation of the Sunnī identity in Baghdād. They stood firm in their belief that the *ḥadīth* could resolve all Muslim concerns. Their emphasis on *ḥadīth* of the Prophet and his first companions made *ḥadīth* an equal partner with the Qurʾān in determining sacred law, a vital element of the Sunnī identity.

²¹⁴ Nimrod Hurvitz, *The formation of Ḥanbalism. Piety into power* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 20.

²¹⁵ George Makdisī, “Ḥanbalite Islam”, in *Studies in Islam*, translated and edited by Merlin Swartz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 239. There is a subtle distinction between rationalists and traditionalists with respect to the use of reason. Both use reason but for different applications. Traditionalists use reason to *justify* the sources of tradition and scripture; rationalists, on the other hand, *apply* reason on tradition and scripture – hence they become speculative theologians or *ahl al-kalām*. See, G. Makdisī “Ashʿarī and the Ashʿarites in Islamic religious history”, *Studia Islamica*, 18 (1963): 22.

²¹⁶ Christopher Melchert, “The adversaries of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal”, *Arabica* 46 (1997): 239.

²¹⁷ Hurvitz, *The formation of Ḥanbalism*, 160.

2.2.3 The Ṣūfīs in ninth and tenth century Baghdād.

Ṣūfism emerged in Iraq between the eight and the tenth centuries and was in this early period of its history mainly characterised by the practise of *zuhd* (asceticism). It was not until the middle of the ninth century that the Ṣūfīs were recognized as a mystical group, distinct in their devotional piety.²¹⁸ The Ṣūfīs were a radical pietistic group who dressed unconventionally.²¹⁹ Their piety required that they spend their life journey combating the desires of the flesh to show spiritual progress and a life focussed on God.

Al-Ṭabarī was living in Baghdād during the period when Ḥanbalīs and the celebrated Baghdādī Ṣūfīs were at odds theologically over their different approaches to the study of the Qurʾān, and to some extent the *Sunna*. In fact, the infamous Ḥanbalī Baghdādī preacher Ghulām al-Khalīl (d. 888/274) led an inquisition against the Ṣūfīs in 877/263. In contrast, the Ṣūfīs had high regard for the Qurʾān and the *Sunna* and therefore were not hostile to the *ahl al-ḥadīth*. The Ṣūfīs believed in the esoteric approach to the Qurʾān and the *Sunna*, rather than the Ḥanbalī exoteric approach of the *ahl-al-ḥadīth*,²²⁰ which put some Ṣūfīs at odds with the Sunnīs in Baghdād.

One has to distinguish between the mystics and the ascetics or renunciants (*al-zuhhād*) who were at times mistakenly labelled as Ṣūfīs. Melchert explains that, although both can be members of *ahl al-ḥadīth*, it is their goals of piety that mark the differences between mystics and renunciants. Ascetical piety centres on the obedience to a Transcendent God whose will (*irāda*) is imposed on the natural world;

²¹⁸ Ahmet Karamustafa, *Ṣūfism. The formative period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1.

²¹⁹ Karamustafa, *Ṣūfism*, 7.

²²⁰ Laury Silvers, *The soaring minaret* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 3.

mystical piety focuses on the communion between the mystic and the Immanent God revealed in nature.²²¹ Ṣūfism emerged in Baghdād after a period of asceticism.

By the late ninth century, the time of al-Ṭabarī's stay in the city, celebrated Ṣūfīs in Baghdād included: ʿAbd-l Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 910/297) and Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 908/295); both were teachers of al-Wāsiṭī (d.932/320) who moved in time to Khurāsān. Al-Junayd was spared from persecution during the inquisition because he declared himself primarily a jurist; al-Nūrī fled from Baghdād. Al-Wāsiṭī settled in the city of Marw and had only one disciple, but his move to the east helped to spread the teachings of his Baghdādī mentors.²²² The tension against the Ṣūfīs in Baghdād continued into the tenth century, culminating in the persecution of al-Ḥallāj (d. 921/308).

Therefore it appears that al-Ṭabarī's Baghdād was a hostile milieu for the Ṣūfīs who were constantly under the threat of persecution and exile. Al-Ṭabarī must have been well aware of the on-going tension between the Ḥanbalīs and the Ṣūfīs, given that he too was a supporter of *ahl al-ḥadīth*. It is believed that al-Ṭabarī was not a Ṣūfī, for he is not listed in the Ṣūfī biographies and he gives no preference to the Ṣūfī esoteric approach in his *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*. Yet, he did not oppose them. This indicates that at that time Ṣūfism was unanimously accepted as part of the Islamic tradition, as far as the view from the centre was concerned.

There is another aspect to be considered with respect to Ṣūfism during al-Ṭabarī's time in Baghdād. The biographical dictionaries do not refer to any contact at all between al-Ṭabarī and the Ṣūfīs. At that time the Ṣūfīs were not involved in

²²¹ Melchert, "The transition from asceticism to mysticism at the middle of the ninth century CE", in *Ṣūfism: critical concepts in Islamic studies*, volume 1 (London: Routledge, 2008), 45.

²²² Silvers, *The soaring*, 42.

politics, but they were known for their pious orientation. Al-Ṭabarī shared this lack of engagement with the political establishment in Baghdād.²²³ Both the Ṣūfīs (with their esoteric knowledge) and al-Ṭabarī were probably part of the intellectual elite of Baghdādī society, yet nothing has been written which indicates that they had any affiliation or regular intellectual contact, or even shared a similar piety. He must have known al-Junayd's thoughts on *Tawḥīd* for example; similarly, the simplicity and worship of the Ṣūfīs must have been an attractive discipline for al-Ṭabarī. Yet al-Ṭabarī was not an esoteric intellectual. But given the tension the Ṣūfīs had with the authorities and the Ḥanbalīs, any relation with the Ṣūfīs must have appeared as a threat to his intellectual endeavour which he did not want to risk.

2.2.4 Al-Ṭabarī: his life in historical context

The biographical dictionaries from later centuries do not say much about al-Ṭabarī's childhood and early life. We do not know, for example, who first taught him Arabic, although his intellectual formation is in Arabic.²²⁴ He was a master of Arabic – a poet of some rank – as evidenced in his *magnum opus*, his Qur'ānic commentary. He was born in 839/224 and his town of birth, Āmul, bordered on the north by the Caspian Sea, by the region of Khurāsān on the east, by Fars to the south and by Iraq to the west.²²⁵ Therefore his name refers to his birth region (Ṭabaristān), where his family owned land, and often he was referred to as Ibn Jarīr.²²⁶ Al-Ṭabarī was born shortly after Caliph al-Ma'mūn's death – during the *Mihna* – and lived until 923/310

²²³ He declined to accept a judge post in Baghdād which was offered to him by Banū al-Jarrāḥ, a prominent and politically connected family in Baghdād. See Mårtensson, “Ṭabarī”, 12.

²²⁴ Gilliot claims that al-Ṭabarī memorized the Qur'ān at age 7 and wrote some *ḥadīth* accounts. See Gilliot, “La formation”, 205.

²²⁵ Franz Rosenthal, “The life and works of al-Ṭabarī”, in *The History of the al-Ṭabarī* (SUNY Press, 1989), volume 1, 10.

²²⁶ Mårtensson, “Ṭabarī”, 8-9.

before the advent of the Shī'ī Būyids to Baghdād in 945/333. For much of his life, the caliphate was located in Sāmarrā' under the influence of the Turkish guards but it returned to Baghdād in 892/278.

At the time of al-Ṭabarī's birth, the Caliph was Abū Ishāq al-Mu'taṣim b. Hārūn (d. 842/227) whose mother was a Turkish concubine of his father Caliph Harūn. Al-Mu'taṣim's Turkish pedigree was evident in his ownership of many Turkish slaves whom he employed to build his caliphal army. This proved problematic in Baghdād, since the Turkish members of the army were hated for their brutality; some were even killed by the Baghdādīs in retaliation. It was al-Mu'taṣim who made the political decision to move his capital to Sāmarrā', 160 km north of Baghdād in 836/221.²²⁷

Al-Ṭabarī's birthplace in the Caspian region in the north was known for its strong Shī'ī presence, thanks to Zaydī activities; the Khārijites were also influential there in 864/250.²²⁸ Al-Ṭabarī does not seem to have been a Shī'ī sympathizer, for on a visit to his hometown in 903/290, he publically criticised Shī'ī doctrines.²²⁹ During his lifetime the empire was in a state of flux. Rebellion had flared in many parts of its vast territories—the Zanj (slaves) rebellion in 869/255 till 880/266,²³⁰ for instance. There were fears that the caliph could not suppress the rebellion. Another friction was incited by the governor of Egypt, Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn (d.884/270) who, in 868/254, the first year of his governorship, sent troops to occupy Mecca in defiance of the

²²⁷ Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdād*, 217-218.

²²⁸ Rosenthal, "The life and works", 11.

²²⁹ Rosenthal, "The life and works", 11-12.

²³⁰ Rebecca Williams, "An analysis of the supernatural archetype of the Prophet Muḥammad as found in the *Sīra/Ta'rikh* and Tafsīr works of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr", PhD Thesis (unpublished), (Montreal: University of McGill, 2006), 41. See also, al-Ṭabarī's "Revolt of the Zanj" in *History*, translated by David Waines, volume 36 (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), which covers the slaves' rebellion against the caliphate from 869 to 880.

caliph.²³¹ His attempt failed, but he was successful in breaking away from the °Abbāsīd caliphate to begin his own dynasty in Egypt between 869/255 and 905/292.

Also in 898/285 the governor of Adherbayjān and Armenia defied the caliph and assumed power over these two regions.²³² Rebellion was rife in other parts of the empire: the Fāṭimids who were Ismā°ilī Shī°ites (909/296 to 1171/566) in North Africa, and the Qarmātians, another egalitarian Isma°ilī sect in east Arabia since 899/286 revolted, attacking Mecca in 930/318 and causing instability to the Sunnī caliphate of Baghdād.²³³ They were eventually defeated in 976/365 by the °Abbāsīds, and were reduced to local dominance in Bahrain. Turbulence, conflict and rebellion were common in the late ninth and early tenth centuries and, as unrest mounted in all four directions from Baghdād, cracks began to appear in the façade that represented the Islamic empire; its sovereignty was challenged. By the mid tenth century, the Baghdādī caliphate although still functioning, had become a mere symbol of unity.

When al-Ṭabarī took up residence in Baghdād in 870/256, the city was already a century old. It is not entirely clear why al-Ṭabarī made Baghdād his home, given that he was equally acquainted with other cities of learning (Baṣra, Kūfa, Fustaṭ), but one can understand that his mind would flourish in a city with such an active intellectual environment. Ironically, he never experienced as much friction with the Shī°ites of Baghdād as he had in his last visit to his homeland.²³⁴ His friction in Baghdād was with the Sunnī Ḥanbalīs who were growing in number and had also begun to influence the other Sunnī legal schools. However, the intellectual culture of Baghdād, its literary output and the spread of libraries and learning centres at the

²³¹ M.S. Gordon, “Ṭūlūnids” in *EF*², volume 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 617. Ibn Ṭūlūn did not initially totally abandon the caliphate in Baghdād but eventually he broke away.

²³² Williams, “An analysis”, 41.

²³³ Williams, “An analysis”, 41.

²³⁴ Rosenthal, “The life and works”, 11-12.

mosques, must have offered an ideal environment for the scholarly temperament of al-Ṭabarī. Besides, Baghdād also offered a more stable milieu than some of the other Iraqi cities such as al-Kūfa and al-Baṣra where there was frequent unrest.

During al-Ṭabarī's time Baghdād was not free from natural catastrophes: in 883/269, 7000 houses were destroyed in Karkh (a pre-dominant Shī'ī merchant quarter in the south-western part of the city) when the Tigris overflowed its banks and flooded the city; two further floods did serious damage to the city in 904/291 and 929/317.²³⁵

With respect to the religious side of Baghdād, it was in constant strife. The city was home to the Sunnī legal schools, the earliest one being the Ḥanafī School, and the most recent one, that of the Ḥanbalīs.²³⁶ During al-Ṭabarī's life, the Ḥanbalite preacher, al-Barbaharī (d. 941), was a strong influence on the formation of a traditionalist Sunnī identity.²³⁷ Al-Barbaharī and his followers vehemently opposed the Shāfi'īs and the Ḥanafīs, including all *mutakallimūn*, who were open to change and allowed some innovation - *bid'ā* – to seep into the tradition. The opposition took the form of notorious street riots, forcing the caliph to curb the riots by increasing the police presence. Although the Ḥanbalīs were not stronger than the police force in the streets of Baghdād, their influence over intellectual life remained palpable. For example, at the time of al-Ṭabarī's death in 923/310, his funeral was a low key affair which did not measure up to the intellectual stature of his scholarship, but the Ḥanbalīs highly suspected his *ijtihād* (personal interpretation) and influenced the

²³⁵ Duri, "Baghdād", 894-899.

²³⁶ Duri, "Baghdād", 894.

²³⁷ Michael Cook, *Commanding right and forbidding wrong in Islamic thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 116.

public against a large funeral.²³⁸ This speculation about his funeral may not be so accurate since al-Ṭabarī lived in simplicity and might have preferred a more humble funeral. He is said to have been buried in the yard of his own house.²³⁹

It was only in 892/278 that the caliphal authority was in effect centred once more in Baghdād. It was at this point in time, with the empire in turmoil, that al-Ṭabarī began to realise the importance of utilising the sacred history of the prophets in his narratives. The re-discovery of the ancient prophets and their *sunnas* would, he might have hoped, initiate self-reflection on Muslim identity and higher expectations for Muslim leadership.

2.2.5 Al-Ṭabarī: from a travelling scholar to a resident in Baghdād

From an early age, al-Ṭabarī exhibited a great thirst for knowledge. Like other scholars of his day he travelled extensively to study under reputable teachers. His father encouraged him to study the Qurʾān and the *Sunna* of the Prophet.²⁴⁰ According to the biographical dictionary of al-Subkī, al-Ṭabarī by the age of twelve²⁴¹ left Ṭabarīstān to study in Rayy under Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Rāzī (d. 862/247-8), who was a Ḥanbalī.²⁴² Al-Rāzī introduced Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra* of the Prophet Muḥammad to al-Ṭabarī. This work was to have a

²³⁸ It is not clear exactly when al-Ṭabarī was buried. Ibn al-Jawzī alleges that he was buried at home during the night and none prayed at his funeral. Rosenthal, however, says that he was buried during daytime at home and later many visited his burial site to pray. Ibn al-Jawzī *al-Muntaẓam fī taʾrīkh al-mulūk wa-l umam*, volume 6 (Beirut: Dār al-thaqāfa, 1998), 172. See, Rosenthal "The life and works", 78.

²³⁹ Mårtensson, "Ṭabarī", 15.

²⁴⁰ Rosenthal, "The life and works", 15.

²⁴¹ Mårtensson, "Ṭabarī", 11.

²⁴² Williams, "An analysis", 30. Al-Rāzī was a ḥadīth expert and a Qurʾānic commentator from whom al-Ṭabarī transmitted al-Maghāzī of Ibn Ishāq. See Gilliot, "La formation", 206.

profound impact on al-Ṭabarī's view of history and prophecy in general.²⁴³ It was his first scholarly expedition.

In 855/240 when al-Ṭabarī was seventeen,²⁴⁴ he moved to Baghdād for the first time to study under Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855/240) who unfortunately died just before his arrival. Ibn Ḥanbal, as mentioned earlier, was the celebrity scholar who emerged a hero from the *Miḥna* (Inquisition). It is not clear from Yāqūt (his biographies of the learned) if al-Ṭabarī studied instead under Aḥmad b. Ḥammad al-Dūlābī (d. 960/350)²⁴⁵ who introduced him to important sources in the *ḥadīth* and to the *Kitāb al-mubtada' wa'l maghazī* of Ibn Ishāq. In fact, al-Ṭabarī's written works often mention as his sources Ḥumayd al-Rāzī (d. 862/247-8) and Ibn Ishāq (d.768/151). His interest in history grew with his study of Ibn Ishāq's *al-Mubtada'* and the *Maghāzī* – the conquest literature of the Prophet.²⁴⁶

After one year in Baghdād, presumably in 856, al-Ṭabarī moved to Kūfa and Baṣra, the two cities in Iraq which had competitive schools of grammar. Al-Ṭabarī then broadened his knowledge by travelling to Syria and Egypt. In Beirut, he studied the *ḥurūf al-Qur'ān* according to the Syrian school under the scholar al-°Abbās b. al-Walīd b. Mazyad al-°Udhri al-Bayrūtī (d.883/269).²⁴⁷ He had a second stay in Baghdād between 858 and 862 during which he was a high rank administrator of the state and he tutored the son of a vizier °Ubayd Allāh b. Yaḥya b. Al-Khaqān (d.877);²⁴⁸ al- Khaqāns were of Persian origin and held al-Ṭabarī in high esteem. But

²⁴³ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, volume 3, 120.

²⁴⁴ Mårtensson, "Ṭabarī", 11.

²⁴⁵ There is a suspicion if al-Ṭabarī took lessons from al-Dūlābī because he is not mentioned in the al-Ṭabarī's *History* as a source for any single tradition. See Gilliot, "La formation", 206-07.

²⁴⁶ Rosenthal, "The life and works", 18.

²⁴⁷ Rosenthal, "The life and works", 23.

²⁴⁸ Mårtensson, "Ṭabarī", 12.

during the third and permanent stay in Baghdād from 870 till his death, al-Ṭabarī held no official positions.

By 870/256 he had arrived in Egypt, where he studied *ḥadīth* extensively and made contacts with the legal schools of al-Shāfiʿī and al-Mālikī. Yāqūt, in his *Ṭabaqāt al-udabāʾ*²⁴⁹ mentions two visits that al-Ṭabarī made to Egypt; his teachers, it is noted, found him excellent in all sciences of the Qurʾān, *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, languages and poetry.²⁴⁹ He became a professional Shāfiʿī in Egypt,²⁵⁰ where he emerged as a public figure of considerable reputation. Al-Ṭabarī as a Shāfiʿī was acquainted with other Shāfiʿīs such as Muḥammad b. Bashshār (d.866/252).²⁵¹ Upon his return to Baghdād around 870/256, he began to write his two major works, the Qurʾānic commentary and later on the history of prophets, kings and their ruling kingdoms.²⁵² The fact that the caliph was not at that time stationed in Baghdād, must have left in al-Ṭabarī's mind a questioning curiosity as he was thinking about the prophets and leaders in history before he started writing his *Taʾrīkh*. How could a ruling caliph have deserted the capital of the empire to a less prominent city, Sāmarrāʾ? Perhaps the departure of the caliph from Baghdād must have given al-Ṭabarī less pressure to serve in his court and enabled him to exercise his intellectual freedom without worrying about another possible *miḥna* as previously happened between 833/218 and 847/232. He was financially independent²⁵³ which gave him more freedom to study as he wished. He was a known scholar and even his students urged him to write concisely,²⁵⁴ an indication that his pupils were challenged by his large literary output.

²⁴⁹ Yāqūt, *Dictionary of learned men*, volume 6, 432-433.

²⁵⁰ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, volume 3, 123.

²⁵¹ Ibn Khallikān, *Kitāb wafayāt*, 123.

²⁵² Rosenthal, "The life and works", 31.

²⁵³ Mårtensson, "Ṭabarī", 11.

²⁵⁴ See al-Subkī's *Ṭabaqāt*, volume 3, 123; see, al-Jawzī's *Al-muntaẓam*, volume 6:171.

The fact that he wrote so prolifically and exercised *ijtihād* (independent thinking) in his *Jāmi'*^c must be a reflection of the Baghdādī milieu in the absence of a caliph's presence prior to 892/278. The matter that the caliph was absent from Baghdād, the tension against al-Ṭabarī was not from the court but rather from the scholars, *'ulamā'*, who were not in agreement about their teachings.

In 903/290, al-Ṭabarī moved to the eastern side of Baghdād to a neighbourhood of grammarians.²⁵⁵ Though no detail is given in biographical dictionaries about this type of neighbourhood, one can imagine that not all residents were necessarily and professionally grammarians; however, the “grammarian” description indicates at best that al-Ṭabarī chose to live in an area where scholars often frequented and probably took residence. He lived a routine life, spending most of his days writing, making daily visits to the mosque and meeting his students. His passion in life was dedicated to religious education; his interactions with the public were basically within the intellectual sphere, and he lived modestly. A well-known scholar of his time, he kept his relations with the caliphate at a distance lest he be accused of political patronage. Yet choosing to live in the eastern side of the Baghdād – where the Caliphate palaces were located- seems to have been a personal political decision on his part since it allowed him to be near the centre of power. Al-Ṭabarī was not politically naive about what went on in the court despite his cautious attitude towards the caliphs.

For example, he was extremely wary of receiving financial gifts, anxious to preserve his integrity.²⁵⁶ Not all the *'ulamā'* in Baghdād were necessarily apolitical individuals. Learned in matters of the sacred law, some used the government and

²⁵⁵ Rosenthal, “The life and works”, 33.

²⁵⁶ Rosenthal, “The Life and works”, 39.

some were used by the government.²⁵⁷ Al-Ṭabarī was one scholar who deliberately avoided entanglement in the politics of the caliphate. His choice to live within the same quarter of the city where the caliph lived did not entice him to befriend the caliph, rather he kept aloof from politics; this seems to suggest that al-Ṭabarī embraced the quasi-separation of authority between the ‘*ūlamā*’ and the caliphs. On the surface, it appears that al-Ṭabarī was vulnerable and lacked political immunity from the Ḥanbalī opponents, and it could have been a contributing factor in the transitory nature of his legal movement (*al-Jarīrī*).²⁵⁸ However, al-Ṭabarī was on friendly terms with the vizier from Banū Jarrāḥ, ‘Alī b. ‘Isa, who gave him support during the tension with the Ḥanbalīs, offered him two posts that of a judge and a position in the *maẓālim* court, but al-Ṭabarī declined both.²⁵⁹

There are two speculations regarding the failure of al-Ṭabarī’s *al-Jarīrī* movement/school. It seems, first, that al-Ṭabarī’s school operated at a personal level (teacher and selected students in debate) or *personal school* but it never became a *madhhab* with a distinct legal approach and methodology.²⁶⁰ Second, there is no historical information to indicate that it ever expanded beyond Baghdād. Perhaps it was because in al-Ṭabarī’s time, the Sunnī tradition in Baghdād was strong enough to disallow or discourage new legal schools. The Ḥanbalī influence was powerful to

²⁵⁷ John Donohue, *The Būwayhīd dynasty in Iraq 334H/945 to 403H/1012* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 316.

²⁵⁸ W. M. Watt, *The Formative period of Islamic thought* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998), 260.

²⁵⁹ Mårtensson, “Ṭabarī”, 12.

²⁶⁰ There is a difference between personal and legal schools. Personal schools were early circles of study where a renowned teacher and his selected students debated issues on *fiqh*, based on sources from the Qur’ān and the *ḥadīth*— this in fact represented the early stages of intellectual debate prior to the emergence of legal schools. Personal schools did not produce legal doctrines. Legal schools, which emerged slowly from these different circles of study, were in fact the producers of legal doctrines, and the membership to legal schools was not based on the reputation of teacher/founder but rather on the methodologies on which legal doctrines were based. See Wā’el B. Ḥallāq, *An introduction*, 31-34.

allow or frustrate new legal methodologies but they were not always successful. If *al-Jarīrī* movement failed because of bad timing, the Shāfiʿī legal movement did not.

There might have been another reason for al-Ṭabarī's choice to settle on the eastern side of Baghdād. Al-Ṭabarī was not an ordinary scholar, his intellectual scholarship and his preference for *ijtihād* (interpretation) must have made him a reputable teacher. He, no doubt, appealed to the elite in his area of Baghdād, in contrast to Ibn Ḥanbal who appealed to the common people.²⁶¹ Al-Ṭabarī was not a populist but an elitist and must have attracted other elite students. For example, he taught prominent Shāfiʿīs, like Muḥammad b. Bashshār (d.866/252).²⁶²

The elite were a much smaller community and found it difficult to continue once their mentor died. These elite members may be his own students who also lived low profile in honour of their teacher and eventually died off. It is interesting to note the differences between al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Ḥanbal as teachers. Ibn Ḥanbal was a high profile teacher who attracted Muslim populists because of his popularity following the *Mihna*; in contrast, al-Ṭabarī kept a low profile in public. These differences in personality were to influence the future of al-Ṭabarī's legal movement of *al-Jarīrī*. It seems unfortunate that al-Ṭabarī was a late arrival on the scene in Baghdād; by the time he arrived, Ibn Ḥanbal was already perceived as the ideal patron saint among the Sunnīs²⁶³ and his reputation was too strong to overcome.

²⁶¹ Christopher Melchert, *The formation of the Sunnī schools of law, 9th-10th centuries CE* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 196.

²⁶² Al-Subkī's *Ṭabaqāt*, volume 3, 123.

²⁶³ Melchert, *The formation*, 196.

2.2.6 The conflict between al-Ṭabarī and the Ḥanbalīs

The biographer, al-Subkī, explains al-Ṭabarī's problem with the Ḥanbalīs, attributing ignorance, jealousy and even heresy to his enemies.²⁶⁴ Although it is a known fact that the Ḥanbalīs tried to prevent anyone²⁶⁵ from studying with al-Ṭabarī, al-Subkī offers a contrary perspective that students and followers could have studied with al-Ṭabarī despite the Ḥanbalī efforts to isolate him, since al-Ṭabarī's intellectual credibility had been established.²⁶⁶ He even chose his students based on their observance of the Sunna. This suggests that al-Ṭabarī was not necessarily anti-Ḥanbalī.

Yāqūt (d. 1229/626) offers the most extensive biographical account of al-Ṭabarī to appear in the biographical dictionaries. In his book *al-Muʿjam al-udabāʾ*, he refers to al-Ṭabarī's Shāfiʿī orientation, which apparently started in Baghdād in the 850s prior to his visit to Egypt.²⁶⁷ Yāqūt states that when al-Ṭabarī returned from Ṭabaristān to Baghdād in 903/290 he was confronted by several Ḥanbalīs who asked his opinion of their founder, Ibn Ḥanbal. Al-Ṭabarī replied saying that Ibn Ḥanbal was a *muḥaddith* but rarely quoted by scholars.²⁶⁸ This assessment of Ibn Ḥanbal as a *muḥaddith* rather than a *faqīh* might had major repercussions for al-Ṭabarī's *Jarīrī* movement. As the Ḥanbalīs held their founder in highest esteem, they took al-

²⁶⁴ This is on the account of al-Faraghānī. See al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, volume 3, 125.

²⁶⁵ Abī Bakr Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Khatīb, al-Baghdādī, *Taʾrīkh Baghdād*, volume 2 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1931), 164.

²⁶⁶ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, volume 3, 125.

²⁶⁷ Yāqūt, *Dictionary*, volume 6, 432-433. Al-Shāfiʿīyya school adopted early on the dual use of the terms *tradition* and *rationality* – a combination which made *ijtihād* possible. The latter was indeed the major fear of the Ḥanbalīs who believed that the *ḥadīth* provided all answers to questions of the spiritual and legal needs of the *umma*.

²⁶⁸ Yāqūt, *Dictionary*, volume 6, 436. Al-Ṭabarī's assessment of Ibn Ḥanbal as a *muḥaddith* rather than a jurisconsult may have had major repercussions against *al-Jarīrī*. The most likely reaction was by the traditionalists who might have perceived al-Ṭabarī's assessment as "anti-*ḥadīth* rationalism." See G. Makdisī "The significance of the Sunnī schools of law in Islamic religious history", *International journal of Middle East studies*, volume 10 (1979): 7.

Ṭabarī's comment as an insult. In retaliation they ostracised him, kept him away from his students, placed him under house arrest and expelled him from the mosque where he usually taught.²⁶⁹

Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233/630) started his biography of al-Ṭabarī with his conflict with the Ḥanbalīs who accused him of Shī'ī inclination and tarnished his reputation.²⁷⁰ The main accusation from the Ḥanbalīs was directed at al-Ṭabarī's book on jurisprudence, *Ikhtilāf*, which did not mention Ibn Ḥanbal as a jurist. Regardless of how we look at this conflict, it shows two relevant historical issues. First, the hierarchy of scholarship in the biographical literature elevated the science of *fiqh*, jurisprudence, over and above *ḥadīth*. Second, the figure of Ibn Ḥanbal remained an iconic and heroic figure even after his death. However, what is implicit in al-Ṭabarī's response to the Ḥanbalīs' criticism was his perception of Ibn Ḥanbal as a transmitter of tradition as we have it in his *Musnad* with its carefully compiled *ḥadīth* accounts.

Al-Ṭabarī's conflict with the Ḥanbalīs makes one question whether or not he was a Shī'ite sympathiser. Was this the real issue behind the conflict? The Shī'ites were not a majority in Baghdād and did not hold political power in the city during al-Ṭabarī's time. However, al-Ṭabarī, it seems, showed no sympathy to the Shī'ite theory of the imamate nor opposed implicitly or explicitly the Sunnī caliphate, although he did vehemently oppose the Mu'tazilī thoughts expressed by the Shī'ites during his last visit to his birthplace.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Yāqūt, *Dictionary*, volume 6, 436-437. See, al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, volume 3, 124-125.

²⁷⁰ Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī l-ta'rikh*, volume 8, 134.

²⁷¹ Rosenthal, "The life and works", 11.

One of al-Ṭabarī's adversaries, Abū Bakr b. Abī Dāwūd (d. 929/317), a competitor in *tafsīr*, denounced al-Ṭabarī as having *Jahmite* inclinations, basically accusing him of being a strong pro-[°]Alid supporter or of Mu[°]tazilī orientation. Despite this accusation, there is no evidence anywhere in al-Ṭabarī's writings that he ever left the Sunnī traditional camp. Likewise, he never accepted [°]Alī as a superior Caliph among the other al-Rāshidūn.²⁷² Rosenthal is of the opinion that accusations like those made by Abī Dawūd's were used to target al-Ṭabarī. However, I think that this accusation went deeper than that. Historically, given the strong Shī[°]ite opposition to the Sunnīs' support of all the Rashīdūn caliphs, it became common for some Sunnīs to accuse other Sunnīs of having Shī[°]ite inclinations. The Shī[°]ite inclination was used by the Ḥanbalīs to accuse al-Ṭabarī of infidelity to the Sunnī belief. Yet it was not the Shī[°]ites who were accusing al-Ṭabarī but the Ḥanbalīs, therefore the accusation was really an interior Sunnī problem concerned with the formation of the legal schools. Sunnī scholars were not always united in their views. At the beginning of the tenth century, the Ḥanbalite movement became more conservative and traditional in its orientation; it remained a movement well into the eleventh century.²⁷³ The intense rivalry between al-Ṭabarī and the Ḥanbalīs was a symptom of the prevalent problem of competition among the legal schools (or movements); it was difficult within the Sunnī circle to reach an agreement about what could be included in the tradition.

Rosenthal astutely put his finger on the real issue with the Ḥanbalīs—the tension was linked to the legal nature of scholarship. Unlike the Ḥanbalīs, al-Ṭabarī

²⁷² Rosenthal, "The life and works", 61.

²⁷³ Berkey, *The formation*, 195.

preferred independent judgement in law rather than blind faith to the tradition.²⁷⁴ This could have been the real feature of the ill-fated *al-Jarīrī* movement. Therefore the real problem between al-Ṭabarī and his Ḥanbalī adversaries lay neither in his creed nor in his view of history, but in the lack of agreement about his *ijtihād*.²⁷⁵

2.3 A view from the edge

Islamic historiography rarely includes the view from the edge, although the edge can offer a very different perspective. It sheds valuable light on the development of Islam from the emerging ‘*ulamā*’, natural scientists, writers and *udabā*’ in areas far from the caliphate centre of power. These emerging groups revealed a side of Islam beyond the political power of the caliphate in Baghdād, and in much closer physical proximity to non-Muslim lands. Over time, with the growth of the *umma*, the edges of the empire formed peripheral, independent power bases. For example, the power of the Fāṭimid caliphate since 869/255 in Egypt paralleled the one in Baghdād. The interest in cities like Nīshāpūr and its prominent inhabitants became of considerable importance politically, theologically and commercially in the middle ages. The medieval biographical dictionaries were able to shed light on these views from the periphery.

²⁷⁴ Rosenthal, “The Life and works”, volume 1, 63.

²⁷⁵ It is unlikely that al-Ṭabarī was a radical traditionalist like some Ḥanbalīs. His carefully selected accounts and *isnād* from the *ḥadīth* collection, are sometimes accompanied by his *ijtihād* (educated opinion) when there are conflicting transmitted accounts.

2.3.1 Nīshāpūr: Regional structure, demography, some historical developments in al-Thaʿlabī's time

Etymologically, *Nīshāpūr* is composed of Persian *nī* (fair) and the name Shāpūr and hence “the fair [city] of Shāpūr”.²⁷⁶ It is a city surrounded with fertile land and reed fields. Nīshāpūr is a pre-Islamic city and five centuries older than Baghdād. In Late Antiquity, it was under the authority of the Sasanian monarchy. Nīshāpūr was founded as a fortress in the reign of Shāpūr (r. 240-272 CE).²⁷⁷ The city limits were bordered in the north by high mountains and in the south by a fertile plateau which extended approximately two kilometres towards a desert.²⁷⁸ The mountains served as a water reservoir for Nīshāpūr and made the surrounding countryside fertile, thus allowing settlements to flourish.

Nīshāpūr during al-Thaʿlabī's life was a typical eastern city. It had a citadel whose gates led into the city. All the commercial markets were at the outer edge of the city.²⁷⁹ Its inner-city streets intersected in straight lines which made the city look like a chess-board. Its inhabitants were considered by the historian al-Maqdisī (d. 1000/390) as boorish and disrespectful of religious authority, especially of the offices of *imām*, *khaṭīb* (preacher) and *mudhakkir* (the one who recites Qurʾānic verses in the mosque).²⁸⁰ This seems ironic considering that there was a surge in religious learning in Nīshāpūr during the time of the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate, made possible by its prestigious *madrasas*. After the Sasanian monarchy was over, other local dynasties

²⁷⁶ E. Honigmann and C.E. Bosworth, “Nīshāpūr”, in *ET*, volume 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 62.

²⁷⁷ Richard Bulliet, *The patricians of Nīshāpūr* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 8. See Honigmann and Bosworth, “Nīshāpūr”, 62; it is suggested in al-Ṭabarī's account that it is likely that the city was founded by Shapūr's successor, Shapūr II.

²⁷⁸ Charles Wilkinson, *Nīshāpūr. Some early Islamic buildings and their decorations* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 38.

²⁷⁹ C.E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1963), 158.

²⁸⁰ Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, 158. See G. Le Strange, *The lands of the Eastern caliphate*. Cambridge: The University Press, 1905, 383-384.

followed, mainly the Ṭahirids, the Ṣaffarids, the Sāmānids and the Ghaznavids. Al-Tha°labī lived through the latter two dynasties.

The Ṭahirid dynasty lasted fifty years until 872/258 when the Ṣaffarids, another dynasty from eastern Khurāsān, took over the region under the military force of Ya°qūb b. Layth al-Ṣaffar (d.879/265). During his reign, the Friday Mosque was built in the city. It is said that the interior was lined with golden tiles, although no trace of this mosque was ever found.²⁸¹ Another Khurāsānian dynasty concurrent to the Ṣaffarids and the Ṭahirids were the Sāmānids who were originally a dynasty from Transoxiana and who, since 819/203, governed Nīshāpūr for about a hundred years (approximately the entire tenth century).²⁸² Meanwhile, the Būyids were governing the western province of Persia.

The Sāmānids were influential in converting²⁸³ their Turkish slave-guards to Islam.²⁸⁴ This must have forged a closer religious bond between the Sāmānid rulers and their army. However, the army proved too powerful for the ruling Sāmānids to handle: In 1004/394, a Turkish regime of ex-slaves, the dynasty of the Ghaznavids, replaced the Sāmānids.²⁸⁵ Thus by the early eleventh century, a new political reality emerged in Nīshāpūr through the Ghaznavids, to be replaced, after al-Tha°labī's death, when the Seljūks came to power to govern all of Persia and Transoxiana.

²⁸¹ Wilkinson, *Nīshāpūr*, 42.

²⁸² Wilkinson, *Nīshāpūr*, 42.

²⁸³ The process of conversion between the seventh and tenth centuries, not just for the slaves, in Khurāsān is a vast topic. It is the main cause of migrants into the urban settings from rural Khurāsānī regions during the ninth and tenth centuries. According to Bulliet, conversion to Islam occurred in five successive periods, each period representing a particular social class of converts. The process of urbanisation in the cities was slow and agricultural base in Khurāsān suffered and could not weather well the famine which hit Nīshāpūr in 1011. Al-Tha°labī must have witnessed the drastic effect of the famine in his city during the early years of the Ghaznavids. See R. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the medieval period* (Cambridge-MA: Harvard University press, 1979), 1-4, and 33-64.

²⁸⁴ See P.M. Holt, editor et al, "The disintegration of the caliphate in the East", in *The Cambridge history of Islam*, volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 147.

²⁸⁵ Holt, "The disintegration", 147.

Al-Tha°labī lived during the last fifty years of the Sāmānid state and the first twenty years of the Ghaznavids; by the time of his birth,²⁸⁶ Persian culture and Persian language were at their golden time, especially under the Sāmānid Amīr Naṣr b. Aḥmad (d. 943/331, r. 914-943/301-331) whose two viziers, Abū °Abdallāh Jayhānī (d.941/329) who was a geographer, and later Abū'l Faḍl al-Bal°amī (d.940/328), were strong supporters of culture and the arts.²⁸⁷ This was also the case under the reign of the Amīr Nūḥ II b. Maṣṣūr (r. 976-997/365-387) who commissioned the poet Daqīqī (d. 977/366) to write an epic history of pre-Islamic Iran but he was murdered before completing it;²⁸⁸ likewise, the Persian poet Firdawsī (d. 1020/410) began to write his *Shāh-nāma* under Sāmānid patronage, in order to illustrate the glory of the past Persian kings; however, Firdawsī completed it under the new dynasty of the Ghaznavids. In sum, the Sāmānid rulers during al-Tha°labī's life were the following: °Abd al-Malik b. Nūḥ (r. 954-961/342-350); Maṣṣūr (r. 961-976/350-365); Nūḥ II b. Maṣṣūr (r. 976-997/365-387); Abū'l Ḥarīth Maṣṣūr II (997-999/387-389); °Abd al-Malik II (r.999/389) and Ismā°il Muntaṣir (r. 1000-1005/390-395). Under the Ghaznavids, al-Tha°labī lived under Maḥmūd of Ghazna (d. 1030/421) and briefly under his son Mas°ūd (d. 1040/431).

Sāmānid political power was in decline during al-Tha°labī's time. After the death of the Amīr Naṣr b. Aḥmad, the Sāmānids focused their energy on the western side of their empire, especially on Ṭabaristān where the Ziyārids had difficulties with

²⁸⁶ It is estimated by T. Nagel that al-Tha°labī was born probably around 950. See Saleh, *The formation of the classical tafsīr tradition*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004, 55. The author commented on T. Nagel's finding in his *Die Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā°: Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte* which suggests that al-Tha°labī's °Arā°is were written after his major Qur°ānic commentary *al-Kashf wa-l bayān*.

²⁸⁷ *The Cambridge History of Iran*, edited by R.N. Frye, volume 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 142.

²⁸⁸ Frye, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 4, 154.

the Būyids. The latter's entry to Baghdād in 945 heightened the tension with the Sāmānids²⁸⁹ who were loyal to the caliphate in Baghdād. Meanwhile, the converted Turkish slaves became an established force which meddled with the affairs of the Sāmānid amīrs; for example, they assassinated Amīr Bakr b. Malik al-Farghānī in 961.²⁹⁰ At the same time the local *dihqāns* (landlords and members of the social elite) in Khurāsān became weak in the countryside because the Turkish slaves increased in influence and control.²⁹¹ By the late tenth century, Khurāsān was in a new political horizon passing from the Sāmānid dynasty to the Ghaznavids.

The Ghaznavids were no less interested in culture and literature given that they emulated the Sāmānids as patrons of the arts. The first ruler, Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghazna, was a learned man especially in the sacred traditions of the Qur'ān and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*).²⁹² He mastered the art of the sword and was a supreme military strategist; he fought in several battles so that he earned the honorific title of *Sayf al-dawla*. Despite being a *ghāzī* and an expansionist²⁹³, Maḥmūd also exercised diplomacy before he used the sword; this is illustrated by his struggles with his brother Ismā'īl as they competed for the throne over Ghazna after the death of their father. It was only after several failed attempts to convince his brother that he had the superior right to succession to the throne that Maḥmūd used the sword to take the throne by force.²⁹⁴ A similar diplomatic overture had occurred earlier between him and the Sāmānid Amīr Nūḥ who would not give Khurāsān to Maḥmūd; the latter

²⁸⁹ Frye, *The Cambridge History*, volume 4, 151.

²⁹⁰ Frye, *The Cambridge History*, volume 4, 151-52.

²⁹¹ Frye, *The Cambridge History*, volume 4, 152-53.

²⁹² Muḥammad Nāẓim, *The life and times of Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghazna* (Cambridge: University Press, 1931), 34.

²⁹³ Maḥmūd expanded his empire to the west of Persia where he defeated the Būyids and persecuted the Shī'ites. Hodgson, *The venture*, volume 2, 41.

²⁹⁴ Nāẓim, *The life and times*, 39.

tried to negotiate his way to get Nīshāpūr under his command but failed. The interaction between diplomacy and the use of force by the first Ghaznavid Sulṭān must have been known to al-Thaʿlabī – in his *ʿArāʾis*, one sees this tension between military force and diplomacy in several places (cf. Chapter Five).

Maḥmūd governed autocratically, inflicting punishment mercilessly upon his viziers and administrators whenever he saw fit. As a Sulṭān, he accepted advice only when he wanted to hear it; in effect he regarded his viziers *de facto* as enemies because he often suspected their ambitions even if they were efficient administrators. For example, he imprisoned his vizier Abūʿl ʿAbbās Faḍl b. Aḥmad (d.1013/403) and let him die there on charges of extortion,²⁹⁵ even though he was a capable vizier. Sulṭān Masʿūd later behaved similarly toward his vizier Abū ʿAlī Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbbās (d. 1031/422) who was known as Ḥasanak and at one time he held the post of presidency (*riʿāsa*) of Nīshāpūr.²⁹⁶ Al-Thaʿlabī lived through an eventful period that witnessed rulers who were both ruthless and highly demanding of their subjects. The Sulṭān’s court was a dangerous place and being vizier was a life-threatening occupation.

2.3.2 The religio-intellectual life of Nīshāpūr

The religio-intellectual life of Nīshāpūr functioned on at least three levels: the *ʿulamāʾ*; the competitive tension between the two legal schools, the Ḥanafīs and the Shāfiʿīs; and the exegetical development of the Qurʾān. Institutionally, intellectual life organized itself into a *madrasa* model – a system of learning *fiqh* outside the mosques. The view from the edge is effectively local. In Persia not all people

²⁹⁵ Nāẓim, *The life and times*, 135.

²⁹⁶ Nāẓim, *The life and times*, 137.

travelled to learn *ḥadīth* or to receive religious education.²⁹⁷ *Al-ḥadīth* was often learned locally. This means that al-Ṭabarī was an exception to the norm.²⁹⁸ In Nīshāpūr, many scholars were home grown, although, on occasions, Ismāʿīlī scholars arrived to teach their doctrines. Nīshāpūr remained Persian in spite of the Arab conquest. Out of its intellectual milieu, the *madrasa* emerged from Nīshāpūr and spread through the empire when the Seljūks came to power (for example, the Nīzamīyya college in Baghdād).

The growth of education in Nīshāpūr paralleled its urban development. Initially the *sharīʿa* was practised in small groups, but as the Islamic empire grew it developed to embrace the broader strata of society. As cities grew within Islam, the specialty of the law became widespread through the legal schools, and the *fiqh* became the most important Islamic science.²⁹⁹ But who were the *ʿulamāʾ*? To which social tier did they belong in tenth- and eleventh-century Nīshāpūr?

In Nīshāpūr, the *ʿulamāʾ* represented socially significant leading families characterized by three salient features: wealth, scholarship and power.³⁰⁰ They had a palpable influence on all social classes, which in Nīshāpūr were rigidly set. Bulliet intentionally called the elite classes the “patricians” of Nīshāpūr—landlords, merchants and clerics.³⁰¹ The patricians, due to their wealth and standing within the community, and due to their learning and influence were able to adapt to the invading forces such as the Arabs and the Seljūks. As the political climate changed,

²⁹⁷ Bulliet, *Islam. The view*, 85.

²⁹⁸ In the late medieval times, twelfth to fourteenth centuries, scholars travelled not just to collect *ḥadīth* accounts. Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr collected *ḥadīth* accounts in their travelling. Some travelled to explore new regions and have written geographical dictionaries. Hence, the concept of *al-riḥla fī ṭalib al-ʿilm* flowered in written genre, such as those of Ibn Jubayr (1217/614) and Ibn Baṭṭūta d. 1377/779). See I. R. Netton “Riḥla”, in *ET*², volume 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 528.

²⁹⁹ Bulliet, *Islam. The view*, 94.

³⁰⁰ Bulliet, *Islam. The view*, 109.

³⁰¹ Bulliet, *The patricians*, 22.

the patricians would assimilate by negotiating terms with the new government. For example, the landlords managed to negotiate treaties which would save their land from the invading forces, and the merchants managed to keep their status due to their financial skills, while the clerics were highly accepted and influential due to their knowledge of religious law – the *qāḍī*'s verdict was considered equivalent to God's judgement. Clerics relied on nepotism to protect their family structures and secure the social eminence attached to every religious position. However, under the Seljūks in the eleventh century only the *'ulamā'* remained influential, as their jurisdiction over every aspect of social Muslim life, except criminal law (*maẓālim*) remained unchallenged, for *maẓālim* was not yet developed in the Islamic judiciary.³⁰²

A major cultural activity in Nīshāpūr and eastern Khurāsān was Qur'ānic exegesis.³⁰³ It would develop into a school comprised of three notable figures: Ibn Ḥabīb who was the teacher of al-Tha'labī, al-Tha'labī himself, and his student al-Wahīdī (d.1076/468).³⁰⁴ Not much is known about the school, except that it contributed to the development of exegetical science. Given that most scholars in Nīshāpūr studied locally, educational resources had to develop from within. In this case, Nīshāpūr was unique in the eastern region of the empire, for it was a place where the Qur'ānic science was silently flourishing at a time when the rest of the empire was mostly busy with urban organization, caliphate crises and management of its fluctuating boundaries.³⁰⁵

³⁰² Bulliet, *The patricians*, 25.

³⁰³ Saleh, *The formation*, 28.

³⁰⁴ Sāleḥ, *The formation*, 28. Al-Wahīdī was of Christian Armenian origin from the Mattan family. His main works were *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, *Wajīz* and *Wasīf*. He was known for his eloquence and his ability to explain the poetry of al-Mutanabbī. See Nourī, *The scholars of Nīshāpūr*, 432.

³⁰⁵ There were other Qur'ānic exegetes in Nīshāpūr during al-Tha'labī's time – Al-Wahīdī and Ibn Abī-l-Ṭayyib (1066/459)— who was well connected with the Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghazna. This

Politically, during al-Tha[°]labī's time, Nīshāpūr was governed by two different dynasties: the Sāmānids, and later the Ghaznavids. The Ghaznavids were the first Turkish dynasty to govern Khurāsān. Both dynasties supported the [°]Abbāsīd caliphate of Baghdād but not the Shī[°]ism of the Fāṭimids and their Ismā[°]īlī supporters. Some of the traditionalist *‘ulamā’* who were politically inclined sought to procure the rulers' support for their orthodoxy, offering the legitimacy of their religious authority in return.³⁰⁶ Nīshāpūr became a centre for the development of doctrine by the Ḥanafīs, Shāfi[°]īs, Ṣūfism, Ash[°]arism and Karrāmiyya.

2.3.3 - Religious development and tension in Nīshāpūr

The intellectual view from the edge during al-Tha[°]labī's time differs from that of the centre, particularly in the formation of Sunnī identity. By the tenth century in Baghdād, as mentioned earlier, the Sunnīs were establishing their identity through their esteem for the Prophet's *ḥadīth*, his *Sunna*, and the formation of the legal schools. In Nīshāpūr, in contrast, the Sunnī traditionalism was not yet normative, nor was it considered heretical.³⁰⁷ So orthodoxy was not unanimous across the empire during al-Tha[°]labī's life. This is not to ignore the on-going tension between the Shāfi[°]īs and the Ḥanafīs in Nīshāpūr during the late tenth century,³⁰⁸ which escalated along with Shī[°]ite conflicts in eastern Khurāsān. However, the Shāfi[°]īs and the

relationship was advantageous for al-Ṭayyib was granted a *madrasa* Isfarā[°]īn. See Nourī, *The scholars of Nīshāpūr*, 42.

³⁰⁶ Saleh, *The formation*, 27.

³⁰⁷ Saleh, *The formation*, 28.

³⁰⁸ See R. Bulliet, "The political-religious history of Nīshāpūr in the eleventh century", in *Islamic civilization*, edited by D.S. Richards (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer Publishers Ltd, 1973), 75. A Shāfi[°]ī *qāḍī* was replaced by a Ḥanafī *qāḍī* Abū [°]Alā[°] Ṣa[°]īd (d. 1039/430); this appointment was due to the Sāmānid pressure on the Simjurid governor of Nīshāpūr in 987/376.

Ḥanafīs were united in their opposition to the Karrāmiyya, a strong missionary sect competing for followers in the countryside of Khurāsān.

The city of Nīshāpūr was not free from social tensions between the ninth and the eleventh centuries. For example, affiliation to different legal schools caused some tension, and the religious leadership suffered in the process. The Ḥanafīs were dominant in the early eleventh century in the northeast region of Khurāsān. However, although they maintained their influence in Nīshāpūr among the less-learned Muslims their influence with the elite was waning due to the growing appeal of Shāfiʿism.³⁰⁹ This appeal coincided with the emergence of an alternative theology, Ashʿarism, which was gaining in popularity with the decline of Muʿtazilism.³¹⁰ Ashʿarism became the *nouveau-riche* theology of the time, and was adapted by the legally oriented Shāfiʿīs in the tenth century.

In the city of Nīshāpūr at that time there were two active legal schools (*madhhabs*) which competed for political power and patronage support from the ruling sultāns— the Ḥanafīyya and Shāfiʿīyya, in addition to the theological school of the Karrāmiyya. Each *madhhab* had its followers and offered a coherent synthesis of law, theology and devotional piety.³¹¹ This suggests, as mentioned earlier, that by

³⁰⁹ Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, 173. The Nīshāpūrī scholars like Abū Muḥammad Juwayni (d. 1085/477) and his son Imām al-Ḥaramain Abū l-Maʿālī (d.1085/477) were taught and passed on the doctrine of Shāfiʿism to prominent figures like al-Ghazālī, bringing Shāfiʿī thoughts to the intellectual mainstream.

³¹⁰ In matters of law and theology, Ashʿarism took the middle road between Ḥanbalism and the rationalism of the Muʿtazilites, for it was both traditionalist and rationalist. See G. Makdisī “Ashʿarī and the Ashʿarites in Islamic religious history”: 23. Melchert categorizes the Shāfiʿī movement as semi-rationalist because it uses both the tradition of the *Sunna* and analogical reason on the *ḥadīth*. See *idem*, *The formation of the Sunnī schools of law, 9th-10th centuries, CE* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 70.

³¹¹ Margaret Malamud, “The politics of heresy in medieval Khurāsān: the Karrāmiyya in Nīshāpūr”, in *Iranian studies*, volume 27 (1-4), 1994: 38. Legal schools began as regionally defined movements in the seventh century; by the eighth century, they carried the names of their founders; these movements became popular, established groups by the ninth century, with reputable teachers/students; because of their popularity, these movements were assimilated into religious institutions – *madrasas* – during the tenth century with endowment funds to make full-time studies possible. With the institution of *madrasas*, religious social classes became political and started to penetrate establishments with

al-Tha^clabī's time, there was little agreement on orthodoxy in matters of law and theology. Legal schools in Nīshāpūr were not yet specific in their theological orientation.

The Ḥanafites in Nīshāpūr, for example, were traditionalists with changing allegiances to schools of speculative theology (*kalām*).³¹² In general, they had different theological inclinations depending on when and where they lived, which made the Ḥanafiyya a legal school capable of adapting to new political situations. But from the middle of the eleventh century, the Ḥanafīs became associated universally with the Māturidī theological camp,³¹³ the outcome of pressure exerted on the Mu^ctazilīs under the Seljūks.

The accord between the privileged of Nīshāpūr and the Shāfi^cīs did affect the political ties that the Ḥanafīs continued to have with the sulṭāns. Many of the Ḥanafīs were appointed as *qāḍīs* with high authority on matters of the law, and the sulṭān often sent members of the Ḥanafiyya on diplomatic missions, believing that they were well supported and had important contacts throughout the empire.³¹⁴ In

political power. See Malamud, "The politics of heresy", 37; see also, the "Introduction" in Melchert, *The formation of the Sunnī*, xiii-xxvi.

³¹² Wilferd Madelung, "The spread of Māturidism and the Turks", in *Actas Do IV Congresso de Estudos Árabes E Islamicos* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 114. The Ḥanafīs adapted their theology to the different regions of the Islamic empire. In the tenth century Baghdād, they were Mu^ctazilīs in theological orientation; before the Būyids, in Rayy they embraced the theology of the Najjariyya – a *kalām* school – but they became Mu^ctazilīs under the Būyids. Whereas in Transoxiana, the Ḥanafites were Māturidīs. See Madelung "The spread of Māturidism", 112-113.

³¹³ Under the Sāmānids dynasty, the Ḥanafīs gained status as representatives of official Islam – orthodoxy or mainstream position was expressed by the Ḥanafīs' document *Aswād al-A^czam*, a doctrine which called for total obedience to the ruler regardless of whether he was a just or oppressive leader. Turks were converted under the Sāmānids who became devoted to the Ḥanafīs, and many Ḥanafīs from Transoxiana of Māturidīs orientation moved to Baghdād and Damascus to teach in their schools. See W. Madelung "The two factions of Sunnism: Ḥanafism and Shāfi^cism", in *Religious trends in early Islamic Iran* (New York: The Persian Heritage Foundations, 1988), 30. See *idem*, "The early Murji^ca in Khurāsān and Transoxiana and the spread of Ḥanafism", in *Der Islam*, 59 (1982): 39. For Ḥanafīs' connection politics, see Joseph Schacht and W. Heffening, "Ḥanafiyya", in *ET*, volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 162.

³¹⁴ Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, 174. A *qāḍī* is specialized in the *uṣūl al-fiqh*, which is one of the Islamic sciences such as *kalām* and *ḥadīth*. *Uṣūl al-fiqh* accepts the science of *kalām* and *ḥadīth* and

contrast, the Shāfi'is concentrated their efforts in the formation of the *madrasa*, institutionalising Islamic education and centring it within the intellectual sector of the city. By way of example, one of the major Shāfi'ī families in Nīshāpūr was the Ṣābūnis (literally “soap makers”) whose members were poets, theologians and writers. The city itself had a number of celebrated scholars, such as °Umar al-Khayyām (d. 1123/517), a poet, and his alleged schoolmate, Ḥasan al-Ṣabbāḥ (d.1124/518) who was a revolutionary,³¹⁵ a member of the Nizarī Isma'īlī sect and a founder of the rebellious Assassin sect.

The Shāfi'is appeared in Khurāsān in the ninth century, a century later than the Ḥanafīs.³¹⁶ There have been serious studies done concerning their origin and development in medieval Islam.³¹⁷ Between the eighth and tenth centuries, the Shāfi'iyya was a legal school without any particular theological adherence, unlike the Ḥanafīyya and the Ḥanbaliyya. However, by the eleventh century, the Shāfi'iyya and the theological thoughts of Ash'arism went hand in hand. The Shāfi'is were inclined to traditionalism but not in full favour of *kalām*-speculative theology.³¹⁸ This was the situation in Nīshāpūr during al-Tha'labī's lifetime.

approaches the *Sunna* to extrapolate by reason and analysis the Prophet's words which serve as juristic. *Al-kalām* serves as wide ground for *uṣūl al-fiqh*. See Norman Calder “Uṣūl al-fiqh”, in *ET*, volume 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 931.

³¹⁵ Saleh, *The formation*, 25.

³¹⁶ Madelung, “The two factions of Sunnism”, 26.

³¹⁷ The leading scholars are George Makdisī, Wilferd Madelung, Wā'el Ḥallāq and Christopher Melchert. The origin and development of the Shāfi'ī School featured prominently in the debate. Ḥallāq for example finds no continuity between the origin of the al-Shāfi'ī's teaching- *Risāla al-Shafi'i*- of the ninth century and the later *Uṣūl al-fiqh* in the tenth century. See C. Melchert “Notes et documents”, *Arabica*, volume 16, 1997, 312. However, when al-Shāfi'ī taught in Egypt between 814-20/198-204, his students compiled his teachings into a *Kūāb al-umm* which was transported to Nīshāpūr by Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Khuzayma (d. 923/310); See Madelung, “The two factions of Sunnism”, 26.

³¹⁸ Madelung, “The two factions of Sunnism”, 27. See Melchert *The formation of the Sunnī*, 68-70; he views the Shāfi'iyya as semi-rationalists and elaborates on the split between *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* and *aṣḥāb al-ra'y* by the ninth century.

Despite the tension between the Shāfi'īs and the Ḥanafīs, they were united against the Karrāmiyya – a theological group that flourished primarily in the countryside, but was also popular within the city of Nīshāpūr. The Karrāmiyya denounced Shī'ism and Sunnism and tried to destabilize the Sunnī and the Shī'ī identity formation; both the Shī'īs and the Sunnīs sought to get rid of the Karrāmiyya through the sulṭān's interference.³¹⁹ But the Karrāmiyya maintained a strong presence in Khurāsān between the ninth and eleventh centuries. It was a radical, pietistic, theological school founded by Abū 'Abdallah Muḥammad b. Karrām al-Sagazī al-Nīshāpūrī (d. 869/255) of Arab descent, who was a passionate preacher, an ascetic with strong anthropomorphic theological orientation (*tasbīh* and *tajsīm*), and an advocate for *bid'ā* (innovation).³²⁰ His two successors were Ya'qūb Ishāq b. Maḥmashadh (d.993), and Abū Bakr Muḥammad (d. 1030). Under the leadership of Abū Bakr, the Karrāmiyya by the early eleventh century had considerable political power and influence, so much so that he was appointed a president (*ra'īs*) of Nīshāpūr.³²¹ The presidency (*al-ri'āsa*) was next in power to the *qāḍī* post (usually held by a Ḥanafī), and its function was to carry out the orders of the sulṭān and maintain political stability.³²² Piety was the most distinctive feature of the Karrāmiyya and it held great appeal for the poor social classes in Khurāsān; the Karrāmīs succeeded in building networks through the *khānaqās* in the countryside,

³¹⁹ Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, 186.

³²⁰ C.E. Bosworth, "The rise of the Karrāmiyya", *The Muslim World*, 1 (1960), 5. Ibn Karrām was a theologian whose doctrine *'Adhāb al-qabr* had major influence on piety during the ninth century.

³²¹ Nourī, *The scholars*, 260.

³²² Nourī, *The scholars*, 256. Tradition dictated that the *ra'īs* post be conferred on a member of the Ḥanafī (in this case the Mikālīs) family in Nīshāpūr by the sulṭān, but the Ghaznavids had a different agenda. They wanted to support the Karrāmīs as well the Ḥanafīs in order to ease the tension in the politics of Nīshāpūr, and so in 1010 they appointed Abū Bakr Muḥammad to the *ra'īs* post. This helped the Ghaznavids along with the Karrāmīs to fight their common enemy, the Ismā'īlīs. See R. Bulliet "The political religious history of Nīshāpūr in the eleventh century" in *Islamic Civilization 950-1150*, edited by D.S. Richards (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer Publishers Ltd, 1973), 75-76.

opposed economic-monetary gains, and advocated complete trust in God (extreme *tawakkul*) and radical self-mortification.³²³

By the time of al-Tha^clabī, Karrāmites had spread through the empire bringing many converts to Islam.³²⁴ Saleh is of the opinion that al-Tha^clabī was influenced³²⁵ by the school of the Karrāmiyya which shows that it had its intellectual influence even on a leading exegete like al-Tha^clabī. Eventually, the Karrāmites were perceived as a threat to the Ghaznavid dynasty and to the Sunnīs in general.³²⁶ This was a result of the Karrāmite leader Abū Bakr Muḥammad who accused the Ḥanafī Qāḍī Abū °Alā° Šā°id (d.1039/430) of heresy.³²⁷ In return, the *qāḍī* accused Abū Bakr Muḥammad with heresy and anthropomorphism,³²⁸ prompting the Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghazna to put an end to the Karrāmiyya dream of temporal power by removing Abū Bakr Muḥammad from power.³²⁹ As a result, the Karrāmites were expelled from the Nīshāpūran society under the Ghaznavids, showing that Nīshāpūran society in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries was not entirely free from religious and social conflicts.

In summary, the social classes in Nīshāpūr were defined by their wealth, education, political connection and/or religious legal affiliation. In al-Tha^clabī's

³²³ Malamud, "The politics of heresy", 42. From the ninth to tenth century in Nīshāpūr the economy was vibrant and economic gains were commonplace. Piety became a divisive issue, for the Ḥanafīyya believed that it was their pious duty to earn a good living while the Karrāmiyya believed that the believer must trust completely in God for daily provisions. The Karrāmiyya gained the support of the majority of the poor class in Khurāsān and its headquarter was in the northwest section, the poorest quarter of Nīshāpūr. See Malamud, "The politics of heresy", 43-44.

³²⁴ After the Karrāmiyya lost power and influence in Khurāsān, their *khānaqās* were taken over by the Šūfis who adopted Shāfi°ism and allowed their doctrines to be taught in Shāfi°ī schools; in terms of pedagogy, the Šūfis developed master-pupil relationships marked by reverential obedience. See M. Malamud "Šūfī organizations and structures of authority in medieval Nīshāpūr", *International journal of Middle East studies*, volume 26 (1994): 436-437.

³²⁵ Saleh, *The formation*, 6.

³²⁶ Tha^clabī regarded the Karrāmiyya as Sunnīs – See Saleh, *The formation*, 48.

³²⁷ Bulliet, "The political-religious", 77.

³²⁸ Bulliet, "The political-religious", 77.

³²⁹ Bulliet, "The political-religious", 77.

lifetime, Nīshāpūr saw a large population and the city flourished intellectually through its *madrasas* of legal science, pioneering in Qurʾānic exegesis. Yet Nīshāpūran social life was highly stratified, with little movement between the classes, as evidenced in the failure of the Karrāmiyya whose attempt to gain political power in the region through its appeal to the popular masses was unsuccessful due to the influence and power of the elite class.

2.3.4 - Mysticism in Nīshāpūr

By the time that Baghdādī Ṣūfism arrived in Khurāsān in the early tenth century, thanks to al-Wāsiṭī, the city of Nīshāpūr had already its own mystical tradition in the form of the Malāmatiyya. In fact, the Malāmatiyya was a contrasting mystical group to the Karrāmiyya. In contrast to the ostentatious asceticism of the Karrāmiyya, the Malāmatiyya emerged in the ninth century Khurāsān to demote all visible religious rituals. Religious spirit is meant to be a private matter. The Malāmatiyya was a movement founded by Ḥamdūn al-Qaṣṣār (d. 884/270), who was uncompromising in his austerity and the need for vigilance against the temptations of the baser lower self (*nafs*).³³⁰ The Malāmatiyya offered inward-looking self-discipline, thus seeking purification against carnal desires. In principle, it opposed the outward and visible piety of the Karrāmiyya. For example, the Malāmatiyya cultivated a private form of piety in contrast to the exoteric piety of the Karrāmiyya; the Malāmatīs emphasised self-scrutiny (the path of blame) and a conduct (*adab*) of altruism (*futuwwa* or fraternities).³³¹ Unlike the Karrāmīs, the Malāmatīs were

³³⁰ Karamuṣṭafa, *Ṣūfism*, 48.

³³¹ Sara Sivri, “Hakīm Tirmidhi and the Malāmatī movement in early Ṣūfism” in *Ṣūfism: critical concepts in Islamic studies*, edited by L. Ridgeon, volume 1, 146.

primarily from the social class of artisans and merchants and so they were working members of the Nīshāpūran society;³³² they emerged in reaction to the pious exoteric spirituality of the Karrāmiyya. In contrast to the Karrāmīs, the Malāmatīs kept a low social profile and did not seek social status or to draw attention from others to themselves. Their presence was among the people as opposed to establishing visible *khānaqās*, and unlike other Ṣūfīs they were not identified by their attire. They constantly exercised self-scrutiny to control personal pride and to suppress ambition and hypocrisy to tame the self (*nafs*). This type of piety was not widely accepted by some Ṣūfīs who found self-blame too excessively focussing on one's self than on God and repentance.³³³

The Malāmatiyya could not remain a distinct, independent mystical piety. By the tenth century with the advent of Ṣūfism to Khurāsān, the mystical Malāmatiyya were absorbed by Ṣūfism and a new type of Malāmatī-oriented Ṣūfīs emerged, such as al-Qushayrī (d. 1072/ 464) and al- Sulamī (d.1021/412) who proved to be members of the ruling elite class of scholars.³³⁴ Al-Sulamī praised the ideal of the Malāmatī self-scrutiny and regarded them higher than most Ṣūfīs (people of the *ma'rifa*).³³⁵ It is said that in the early tenth century, there were five pious/ascetic people in Nīshāpūr; at the end of the same century, nearly one-half of the mystics in

³³² Karamuṣṭafa, *Ṣūfism*, 48.

³³³ The Ṣūfī teacher al-Tirmidhī (ca. d. 900/287) recommended that too much attention on the baser self (desires of the flesh) can prevent one from directly orientating to God. Al-Wāsiṭī taught that the concentration on the baser self creates a dualism between self and God, a misguidance to the Oneness of God; al-Junayd advocated repentance instead of self-blame which is to consciously surrender one's sins and move towards God. See Karamuṣṭafa, *Ṣūfism. The formative period*, 49-51. Even al-Qushayrī viewed repentance quite positively and as a source of happiness. See his *Risāla al-qushayriyya fī 'ilm al-taṣawwuf*, translated by Alexander D. Knysh (London: Garnet Publishing Ltd, 2007), 111.

³³⁴ Karamuṣṭafa, *Ṣūfism*, 66-68.

³³⁵ This is found in the original Arabic text of the *Risāla al-malāmatiyya* by al-Sulamī, found in the last section of 'Afīfī's *al-Malāmatiyya*, 86. See also Karamuṣṭafa, *Ṣūfism*, 63.

the city were Ṣūfis.³³⁶ A growing Ṣūfī presence in Nīshāpūr attracted members of the Malāmātiyya to the larger pietistic tradition of Ṣūfism. Therefore al-Tha°labī in his youth must have known the Malāmātī and Ṣūfī mysticism in his city. The fact that little is written in the biographical dictionaries about al-Tha°labī, suggests that al-Tha°labī did not seek personal recognition/popularity; this resonates with al-Malāmātiyya's piety. It is possible, considering the circumstances, that the Nīshāpūran indigenous mystical tradition made an impact on al-Tha°labī, leading him to embrace certain of its teachings while keeping a critical distance vis-à-vis some of its more extreme aspects. When we come to examine al-Tha°labī's writings in later chapters, an evidence for this hypothesis will be presented.

During al-Tha°labī's time the Ṣūfī teachings appeared, for the first time, as manuals or as fixed systematic handbooks between 967/356 and 1074/466.³³⁷ Al-Qushayrī's *Risāla al-qushayriyya fī °ilm al-taṣawwuf*, al-Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya* and Kharkūshī's (d.1016/406) *Tahdhīb al-asrār* were handbooks which were written in this period in Khurāsān alone. In this way, al-Tha°labī must have had access to the books and thoughts of his contemporary Ṣūfī writers in his land of residence. One can regard al-Tha°labī in the eleventh century as an heir of rather rich intellectual activities in the period of 'Iranian intermezzo'³³⁸ and at a time when Ṣūfism is institutionalised while former religious differences are slowly getting harmonised.

³³⁶ Karamuṣṭafa, *Ṣūfism*, 60. One should keep in mind that all Ṣūfis were mystics but not all mystics were Ṣūfis.

³³⁷ Alexander Knysh, *Islamic mysticism. A short history*. Leiden: Brill, 2000, 116.

³³⁸ This term is taken from Minorsky who viewed the time between the seventh and the eleventh centuries as the intermezzo between the Arab and the Turkish conquests of Persia. Al-Tha°labī, under the Sāmānīd and the Ghaznavīd dynasties, lived in such a rich and inclusive culture. See Claude Cahen "Būwayhids" in *ET*², volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 1350.

2.3.5 – Al-Tha‘labī: the man and orientation

Little is known about al-Tha‘labī’s personal life. Information in the medieval biographical dictionaries is sporadic and offers very limited biographical detail. The main biographical source is from al-Fārisī (d. 1135/529), written roughly one century after al-Tha‘labī’s death;³³⁹ later biographical sources rely on al-Fārisī’s account. As mentioned earlier he lived through the historical period between 950/338 and 1035/426 which fell under two successive dynasties, the Sāmānids and the Ghaznavids. He died before the Sunnī Seljūks came to power in Khurāsān.

The biographical dictionaries of al-Subkī and Ibn Khallikān both quote Abū l-Qāsim ‘Abd Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī (d.1072/464) who dreamed that God revealed al-Tha‘labī as worthy of attention and exaltation.³⁴⁰ This dream suggests that al-Tha‘labī must have left an impact on the Ṣūfīs of Nīshāpūr. Al-Qushayrī’s reference praises al-Tha‘labī as a major scholar. It underscores his holiness and the extent of his scholarship. It has been suggested that he was a *muqri’*, one who is not just skilled in reading the Qur’ān, but an innovator in the hermeneutical reading and interpretation of the Qur’ān. His scholarly ability earned him a reputation as an *imām*, a *ḥāfiẓ*³⁴¹ and a man skilled in Arabic.

Although al-Qushayrī was a Ṣūfī, his dream of al-Tha‘labī does not prove that al-Tha‘labī was also a Ṣūfī. He was neither mentioned in the Ṣūfī dictionaries of later centuries, nor was he a pupil of one, although he included Ṣūfī *ḥadīth* in his

³³⁹ Iḥsān ‘Abbās wrote a review on Richard Frye’s *Histories of Nīshāpūr (The Muslim World 60* (1970): 189-191). It deals with the works of ‘Abd-l- Ghafīr al-Fārisī whose lengthy biographies suggest editorial additions to the original works. In addition, Bulliet in his introductory notes to *The patricians of Nīshāpūr* (xi) affirms that al-Fārisī’s *Siyāq li-Ta’rīkh Nīshāpūr* is a sequel to a more original work of al-Ḥakīm al-Nīshāpūrī’s (d. 1015/405) *History of Nīshāpūr*. Both works are considered as one corpus. W. Saleh’s *The formation*, offers a biographical construction of al-Tha‘labī based on the primary sources and modern scholarly works, 25-66.

³⁴⁰ Al-Subkī’s *Ṭabaqāt*, volume 4, 58; see also Ibn Khallikān’s *Kitāb wafayāt*, 59-60.

³⁴¹ Saleh, *The formation*, 36.

exegesis, so we can conclude that he was not, therefore, a typical scholar of his time.³⁴² He was a scholar renowned for his exegetical expertise and for preserving and transmitting the Islamic tradition in its different movements. Al-Thaʿlabī was very different from the Ḥanbalī scholars who selected *ḥadīth* only from ‘orthodox’ sources. His use of *isnād* includes sources from the Shīʿī and Ṣūfī accounts. In this way he portrays the tradition as it was, a colourful mix of sources, rather than highlighting only the more reputable ‘Sunni’ *ḥadīth* sources. Each episode in his *ʿArāʾis* offers a more detailed depiction of a prophet than the works of other exegetes. Though he was faithful to the Qurʾānic language, al-Thaʿlabī created a new literary genre, a type of Qurʾānic language that relied on more comprehensive *ḥadīth* sources. This genre was more narrative than the traditional exegesis which built on isolated units of information, or *khavar*. Within his narrative al-Thaʿlabī inter-wove the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth* to create an *adab*-style exegesis.

However, al-Thaʿlabī was not the only one to write narrative exegesis. Al-Kisāʾī³⁴³ would employ some exegesis too, but al-Thaʿlabī transmitted marginal *ḥadīth* such as the sayings of Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. ca. 778/161) and al-Shiblī (d. 945/333).³⁴⁴ Al-Kisāʾī, in comparison, rarely resorted to the *ḥadīth* corpus for his sources and relied more or less on the power of his imagination. Al-Thaʿlabī was more religious in orientation and intent when approaching the *qīṣaṣ* of the prophets. He remained at heart a traditionalist, who explored the variety of sources from the tradition. This is not to say that he accepted all sources of the tradition without

³⁴² Despite the fact that some scholars associate al-Thaʿlabī with Ṣūfism, Saleh claims that al-Thaʿlabī was a not Ṣūfī because he neither took the Ṣūfī cloak, nor became a novice nor practised Ṣūfī devotion (*dhikr*). See his *The formation*, 57.

³⁴³ He was a Persian Qurʾānic exegete, well known for his fantastical version of the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*.

³⁴⁴ Rachel Milstein, Karin Rühdanz and Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the prophets: illustrated manuscripts of qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, (Costa Meza, CA: Mazda publishers, 1999), 9.

considerable substantiation and evaluation. In his *al-Kashf wa-l bayān* (his *tafsīr* of the Qurʾān) he re-arranges, omits or keeps some of al-Ṭabarī's *ḥadīth* sources.

One question is whether al-Thaʿlabī was indeed a patrician in Nīshāpūr society? Did he belong to the upper or elite class of his city? First, we know that he was a Shāfiʿī in legal orientation,³⁴⁵ which suggests that he belonged to the learned class in tenth-century Nīshāpūr. Second he was an *imām* with considerable skill in reading and interpreting the Qurʾān. Third, by the tenth century al-Thaʿlabī had a wider selection of *ḥadīth* sources on which to draw, than al-Ṭabarī for instance. We can deduce from these facts that he was indeed a learned cleric, an educator and instrumental in founding a school for interpreting the Qurʾān. All these qualifications indicate that he was likely a patrician of some influence among the educated. He was unlikely a Malāmatī since he was neither an artisan nor a merchant.

The view from the edge therefore depicts al-Thaʿlabī as a scholar in all *ḥadīth* sources. Marginal *ḥadīth* is as much a part of the Islamic tradition as strong *ḥadīth* because both types of *ḥadīth* can reflect cultural realities. Al-Thaʿlabī was able to situate the marginal *ḥadīth* within the tradition, drawing from the regional edge of Islam to gather additional sources from such groups as Shīʿism and Ṣūfism.

2.4 Concluding Thoughts

The historical times of al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī were periods of Sunnī formation. Al-Ṭabarī's Baghdād was the centre of the political power of the caliph, until the advent of the Būyids in 945/333; it was also marked by the rise of the Ḥanbalīs and other legal schools. In al-Thaʿlabī's Nīshāpūr, at the edge of the

³⁴⁵ Saleh, *The formation*, 30.

empire, a Qurʾānic exegesis³⁴⁶ was emerging, while its legal schools were seeking to determine which theological direction they needed to pursue to gain political patronage. These two developments in the organized sciences of *fiqh* and *tafsīr* were to contribute to the growth of the Sunnī religious leadership.

These developments also affected the writing styles of our two writers. Al-Ṭabarī used carefully selected *isnāds* (strong transmissions which link to either the Prophet or his companions) as part of his written style—a more traditional means of transmission than that of al-Thaʿlabī. Al-Thaʿlabī, in contrast, includes cross selections from strong and weak *isnāds* revealing that the Nishāpūrī Sunnī identity was not as narrowly defined as the one in Baghdād. The historical reality at the edge influenced al-Thaʿlabī to define more comprehensively the Islamic tradition, and to include even sources rejected or not considered relevant by scholars in Baghdād. Two issues therefore are simultaneously at play: the Sunnī identity and the Islamic tradition.

This can be explained in two ways. The centre tended to choose a more triumphant approach to tradition, which corresponded to the symbolic caliphal power after its return from Sāmarrāʾ. Al-Ṭabarī offers neither direct criticism against the one caliphate, nor sides with popular Sunnī Ḥanbalism, a fact which leaves him vulnerable to the Ḥanbalīs' opposition for the rest of his days. He is an independent thinker, as evidenced by his *ijtihād* in the Qurʾānic exegesis. The *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, his *tafsīr*, marks a zenith in Qurʾānic exegesis and served as a standard for subsequent *tafsīrs*.

³⁴⁶ One feature of al-Thaʿlabī's interpretation is that he focuses on the uniqueness of each Qurʾānic verse and elaborates on verses which al-Ṭabarī has not commented on. In addition, al-Thaʿlabī enriches the mystical interpretation of some verses rather than just repeat accounts from the mystical tradition. Saleh, *The formation*, 158-59.

Al-Tha°labī placed more emphasis on the story content (*matn*) than its chains of transmission (*isnāds*). He was more descriptive in his writing. Consequently, al-Tha°labī broadened the notion of tradition, incorporating both strong *ḥadīth* and comprehensive / marginal *ḥadīth* as legitimate components of the tradition. Didactics became the priority of *tafsīr* in the view from the edge. This fact alone set Tha°labī apart from other Sunnī scholars and caused him to be deliberately underrated by later Muslim scholars for his Shi°ite sensibilities in his written corpus. He wove a more comprehensive Muslim outlook, which included non-Sunnī movements and non-Islamic sources, into a process of Islamisation (to situate Biblical prophets in Muslim context as depicted in his narrative). This suggests that Sunnism in tenth century Nīshāpūr was in a way less defined than it was in ninth century Baghdād.

The defining process of Sunnism was largely in the formation of the legal schools at the heart of Islamic imperial society. Its focus on traditionalism seems to have been the real triumph of Sunnī Islam over the rationalism of the Mu°tazilī and Ash°arī systems. The legal schools though based in tradition fluctuated in their theological orientations; only the Ḥanbalī School stood firmly against theological speculation. The Shāfi°ī partnership with Ash°arism (a theological movement which took a middle ground between Ḥanbalī hard liners and Mu°tazilī rationalism) challenged the Ḥanbalīs how to position this theological school within traditionalism.³⁴⁷

Sunnism in Baghdād was uncomfortable with the tenets of Şūfism in the late ninth to the early tenth century; at the edge of the empire Şūfism found more fertile ground; Şūfism never became a legal school but was a distinctively pious religious

³⁴⁷ See G. Makdisī, “Ash°arī and the Ash°arites”, 37.

movement. At the edge, Şūfism played a developing role in expanding the Sunnī perspective of Islamic tradition. At the level of Islamic praxis, Şūfism was able to unite different mystical individuals and groups into pietistic spirituality which spread across the empire.

Finally, the Sunnī view of history in the tenth and eleventh centuries was a search for excellence in leadership; the narratives of the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* demonstrate the deep-seated desire within Sunnī Islam for the ideal Muslim leader, strong in the Islamic faith and just in political management. This desire was shared by both the central and the peripheral regions of the empire. The return to prophecy was the means to attain the Sunnī desire for leadership and in particular that of the Muslim Prophet, Muḥammad, whose *sīra* became essentially the hermeneutical standard of all prior Biblical Prophets. They, the Sunnīs, saw their self-identity as intricately dependent on the history of the prophets.

Chapter Three

3.0 Just leadership

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the focus of my analysis will be sound/just leadership in al-Ṭabarī's *al-Taʾrīkh (History)* and al-Thaʿlabī's *ʿArāʾis*, as represented by the Biblical figures (Muslim prophets) of Joseph, David and Solomon. These narratives were written in the period during which *al-Adab al-kabīr* and *Qābūs-nāma* were written - ninth to eleventh centuries, a period when the caliphate was gradually losing political credibility. My approach will survey possible areas of leadership for each leader: reconciliation for Joseph; humility and self-criticism for David; diplomacy for Solomon. Each one area will be related to the theme of just leadership.

Leadership thrives through living obedience by all those under the ruler. It is also a religious expectation since disobedience against a ruler is not favoured in the Qurʾān.³⁴⁸ Leaders with political or religious posts were expected to be obeyed and their decisions were expected to serve as norms in the lives of Muslims. It is fair to say that leadership and its justice were the concern of both religion and politics so that justice (*ʿadl* in Arabic) in Islamic literature implicitly suggests a discrepancy between the religious ideal and the socio-political reality. Even during the life of the Prophet Muḥammad when it was the time to establish a new Muslim community, fairness had its own place in the Qurʾān³⁴⁹. It is identified either as *al-qist*³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ See Q 4:59, "O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you." Though the Qurʾān does not specifically designate the political leader as "caliph" or "sulṭān", historically the "caliph" and later the "sulṭān" became *de facto* the institutional form of leadership.

³⁴⁹ The Qurʾān highlights social and ethical justice, and includes several expressions for justice. In addition to *ʿadl* and *qist*, there are other terms such as: *iḥsān* (good deed); *ṣidq* (truthfulness); *mīzān* (scales of justice); and *ḥaqq* (reality). See Jonathan E. Brockopp, "Justice and injustice", in *EQ*, volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 69. A non-Qurʾānic term, *al-inṣāf*, from the *Jāhiliyya* poetry denotes

(fairness) or as *al-ʿadl*³⁵¹. The Qurʾān, however, never uses *ʿadl* or *qist* as political concepts, despite the deep concern for justice in the life of the individual and the Muslim community.³⁵² It is up to the individual to carry out the required justice and having the *Sunna* as the guide. Little concern about political justice exists in the *ḥadīth*, and in early legal discussions of the caliphate/imāmate there is no explicit discussion that the *imām* should be “just.”³⁵³ The political ideal of justice stems neither from the Qurʾān nor from the *Sunna*, and government as an entity had little scrutiny. But in time, as the Greek philosophical ideas started to seep into Islamic literature, the ruler was expected to show in his leadership some balance between fairness and religious ideal.

The idea of justice begins to permeate Islamic political concepts which are discussed in classical Islamic jurisprudence³⁵⁴, the genre of *Mirrors for princes*, and philosophy.³⁵⁵ All three were concerned with the quality of leadership in the Islamic state and government; but these ideas did not by the eleventh century develop into a

justice. Both *qist* and *inṣāf* have the literary meaning of equity, but the intended meaning of *qist* is used in contrast to *ẓulm* (oppression), while *inṣāf* represents impartial equity and integrity. So the Qurʾān emphasises social equity in its attempt to deal with social oppression in seventh-century Arabia. See M. Arkoun, “Inṣāf”, in *ET*, volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 1236. Good or evil deeds are linked to justice and punishment and even rulers do not escape the Qurʾānic mandate of justice. See Blain Auer “Concepts of justice and the catalogue of punishments under the sultāns of Delhi (7th-8th/13th-14th centuries), in *Public violence in Islamic societies*, edited by C. Lange and M. Fierro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 238-239.

³⁵⁰ Q 3: 18, 21; 4:127, 135; 5:8, 42; 6:152; 7:27; 10:4, 47, 54; 11:85; 21:47; 55:9, 57:25.

³⁵¹ Q 2:48, 123, 282; 4:58; 5:95, 106; 6:70; 16:76, 90; 49:9; 65:2.

³⁵² Franz Rosenthal, “Political justice and the just ruler”, *Israel Oriental Studies*, volume 10 (1980): 95.

³⁵³ Rosenthal, “Political justice”, 98.

³⁵⁴ *Al-fiqh* ensured the spiritual purity of the Islamic state, which was taken for granted. This state, however, was to be governed by the *Shariʿa* and under a ruler endowed with *ʿilm* and *ʿadl*. Justice entails fidelity to God’s covenant. See A.K.S Lambton, “The Persian theory of government”, in *Theory and practice in Medieval Persian government* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980), 92-93.

³⁵⁵ A.K.S. Lambton, “Islamic mirrors for princes”, in *Theory and practice in medieval Persian government* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980), 419.

political theory.³⁵⁶ So by the time al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī had written their works, the expectation from leaders remained at the level of the Qurʾān and the *Sunna*. Therefore, the emphasis remained on the personal ethics of religio-political leaders.³⁵⁷

3.2 Justice

3.2.1 Justice in the *Mirrors for princes*.

Courtly advice literature, or the *Mirrors*, was written by early Persian converts (*mawālī*) to advise Muslim rulers on governance. The *Mirrors* may be classified as works of political science but their function was to provide general instructions to the ruler on a variety of subjects. Lambton classifies the three subjects of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), *Mirrors for princes*, and philosophy as theological,³⁵⁸ for all share a common understanding of the state's duty to enforce the *Shariʿa* and to protect Islam either by an *imām* who is endowed with *ʿilm* according to the jurists, or by a philosopher-king who governs through the harmonious use of justice and knowledge.³⁵⁹

The *Mirrors* are not intentionally religious in their counsel for they are not derived from the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet. They overlap with wisdom literature, the sayings of specific sages, and ethics;³⁶⁰ the code of ethics emanates from the religious context and is expressed in the Qurʾān, but the *Mirrors* characteristically insist on self-reflection and the personal improvement of the ruler. The Persians

³⁵⁶ ʿAzīz al-Azmeh, *Muslim kingship* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1997), 89. See also W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic political thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), 81.

³⁵⁷ Lambton, "Islamic mirrors", 442.

³⁵⁸ Lambton, "Justice in medieval Persian theory of kingship", *Studia Islamica*, 17 (1962): 92. See *eadem*, "Islamic mirrors", 419.

³⁵⁹ Lambton, "Islamic mirrors for princes", 419. Al-Fārābī (d. 951/339) integrated Platonic political philosophy into Muslim rational thought. His *Virtuous City* is a Muslim *Republic* of Plato and he borrows the notion of philosopher-king as the legitimate *imām* with the emphasis on *ʿilm* and righteousness of a ruler. See *eadem*, "Justice in medieval", 119.

³⁶⁰ Crone, *Medieval Islamic*, 149.

dominated the writing of this genre during the °Abbāsīd dynasty, particularly the converts to Sunnī Islam.³⁶¹ They focus on the exhortation and praise of the ruler who they believe has the right to demand absolute obedience, though the *Mirrors* try to ensure that the absolute power of the ruler does not offend the Islamic faith. By the time the *Qābūs-nāma* was written in the late eleventh century, the ruler had already taken on the mantle of a king.³⁶²

The ideal ruler is portrayed in the *Mirrors* as one who confronts the evils of society.³⁶³ Therefore the *Mirrors* did not seek historical justification of Islam but promoted the Islamic ideal.³⁶⁴ Unlike the *sīra* genre and historiography,³⁶⁵ the *Mirrors* offer pragmatic wisdom in the form of advice to assist leaders in contexts of conflict; the *Mirrors* demonstrate the proper conduct (*adab*) of a ruler, possibly in response to the politico-religious failure of the caliphs of the time.

Ibn al-Muqaffa° was an early writer to advice rulers in the eighth century following the model of Sasanian-Persian monarchical government. His narratives are significant for they represent a major advancement in the composition of literary texts: the main sources for Islam were no longer the Qur°ān and the *Sunna* alone, but included the pre-Islamic political thoughts of Persia.³⁶⁶ This is not surprising, given

³⁶¹ Crone, *Medieval Islamic*, 152. The more famous Persian *Mirrors* after the ninth century are Kay Kā°ūs' *Qābūs-nāma* and Nizām al-Mulk's *Siyāsāt-nāma*.

³⁶² Crone, *Medieval Islamic*, 164.

³⁶³ Lambton, "Islamic mirrors", 420.

³⁶⁴ One may argue that historiography and the *Mirrors* are both concerned with the spiritual condition of the *umma*; however, the *Mirrors* are more explicit about the required behaviour of sulṭāns than the general Muslim public. Historiography was wider in scope and later biographical dictionaries portray prominent figures in the society of the time as well as its rulers/political leaders.

³⁶⁵ As the Islamic empire grew, the historiography also developed in favour of the rulers and their style of government. See G. Richter, "Medieval Arabic historiography", *Islamic Culture*, volume 39 (1959): 141.

³⁶⁶ It seems that Ibn al-Muqaffa° did not dismiss all pre-Islamic history as *Jāhiliyya* (ignorance). The root *jhl*, though it refers to ignorance, is not the first meaning of *al-jāhiliyya*. *Jhl* initially refers to the antithesis of mildness or *hilm* and *ḥalīm* which means civilized. The Prophet used *al-Jāhiliyya* in this context to promote Islam in contrast to barbarism. See Ignaz Goldziher, "What is meant by al-

that neither the Prophet nor the Qurʾān offered a particular system of government, although both encouraged the social obligation of fairness among Muslims. Two questions arise from this early Muslim appreciation of pre-Islamic history: first, how influential were the Sasanian-Persian thoughts on the political requirements of a ruler? And second, what were the political views of Ibn al-Muqaffa^c and how extensive was his influence?

To answer the first question, the Sasanian-Persian influence on the ruler was two-fold. First, the Zoroastrian religion, which was the state religion of the Sasanians, changed the social composition of the state. Sasanian society had social groups which included priests, warriors, husbandmen, and artisans; each citizen had a particular task based on his social status.³⁶⁷ Sasanian society relied on the golden mean,³⁶⁸ borrowed from Greek-Persian philosophies, for its stability. For a ruler, the Muslim golden mean was finding the political balance between *ʿilm* and *ʿadl*.³⁶⁹ Second, for the Zoroastrian, religion and politics were inseparable; the failure of one would be the failure of the other.³⁷⁰ It was this correlation between religion and politics that appealed to Muslim writers in the evolving genre of the *Mirrors for princes*.

To answer the second question one must realize that Ibn al-Muqaffa^c championed continuity from pre-Islamic history to an Islam in need of new political ideas in order to take it into the future. A late convert to Islam, the timing of his written political thought coincided with the shift from an Arab tribal system to urban

Jāhiliyya?" in *Muslim Studies*, edited by S.M. Stern (New Brunswick, USA: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 203.

³⁶⁷ Lambton, "Justice in medieval": 97.

³⁶⁸ The golden mean is the highest virtue which is in between two extremes. This is an Aristotelian philosophical thought.

³⁶⁹ Lambton, "Justice in medieval": 97.

³⁷⁰ Lambton, "Justice in medieval": 97.

central government which employed imperial bodyguards; Ibn al-Muqaffa^c suspected that these bodyguards could be a potential threat against the caliph.³⁷¹ In his *al-Adab al-kabīr*, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c envisions the ruler³⁷² with absolute power and the right to demand obedience from his subjects; the author expresses increasing anxiety over the political situation in his work, *al-Adab al-ṣaghīr*, in which he advises the caliph to be cautious regarding the appointment of viziers, to exercise his authority to reward the virtuous ones and to impose harsh punishment on the evil-doers.³⁷³ He spells out the proper relationship between the king and his advisors:

A ruler's brilliance shines through viziers and advisors, the former do not benefit except by maintaining etiquette and offering sound advice; no etiquette is manifested except through sound opinion and comprehensive knowledge of state affairs... Thereafter, upon the ruling kings is the duty to know intimately their subjects/advisors in government and to inspect thoroughly their affairs, so that nothing remains hidden of their virtues and vices. This duty carries kings to reward virtuous subjects and to inflict punishment upon evil doers. If this is neglected, the virtuous will slack off in their responsibilities and the evil doers will expand their vice, all of which will result in corruption and decay of the state.³⁷⁴

The ruler should know his viziers' intentions, limitations and ambitions, if he is to prevent the spread of corruption. Accordingly, the ruler can either dispense with those close to him in power, or use them effectively for the common good of the state. In *Risāla al-ṣaḥāba*, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c highlights the virtue of unquestionable obedience to the caliph-*imām*, for the caliph-*imām* is endowed with *ʿilm*:

³⁷¹ Lambton, "Justice in medieval": 97.

³⁷² Ibn al-Muqaffa^c seems to advise the ruler/caliph to be the lawgiver to unify and promote the revealed *Sharīʿa* but this was not implemented during his life time. Later, the Caliph Harūn al-Rāshīd and his two sons tried to take the religious leadership in the first quarter of the ninth century but they failed. See Rudolph Peters' review of Benjamin Jokisch's "Islamic Imperial Law: Harūn al-Rāshīd's Codification Project", in *Journal of the American Oriental Studies*, July-September 2009: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go2081/is_3_129/ai_n55086699.

³⁷³ Lambton, "Justice in medieval": 98.

³⁷⁴ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *Al-Adab al-ṣaghīr wa-l adab al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dar Beirut, 1960), 23-24.

In all these matters (knowledge of the Sunna, the Qurʾān, and morality) and its related issues regarding the required obedience to God the Almighty and His splendour, no one else has the right to obedience except the *imām*, and anyone who disobeys or cheats the learned *imām* forfeits himself.³⁷⁵

The ruler should also have moral integrity, a need well expressed in the early *Mirrors*, if his justice - *ʿadl*- is to be recognised as a fact.³⁷⁶ This perspective changes in the *Mirrors* in subsequent centuries.

By the eleventh century the political caliphate was replaced by the sultānate and a monarchical system of government was imposed, where the divine appointments of the sultāns were due to their possession of both *ʿilm* (religious knowledge) and *ʿadl*.³⁷⁷ *ʿIlm* alone was no longer the only criterion to justify a ruler; it had to be balanced by justice. Already under the Shīʿī Būyids, justice was one of the two virtues expected from a ruler.³⁷⁸ Both Nizām al-Mulk (d.1092/485) and Kay Kāʾūs (d.1084/476) wrote under the Seljūks and advocated justice as a quality required by a sultān. Nizām al-Mulk, in the *Siyāsat-nāma*, accepts Ibn al-Muqaffaʿʿs notion of absolute obedience to the ruler, but he adds the need for a sense of

³⁷⁵ Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, “Risāla al-ṣaḥāba” in *al-Majmuʿat al-kāmila*, edited by Yūsuf Abū Ḥalqat (Beirut: Dār al-bayān, 1960), 198.

³⁷⁶ Rosenthal, “Political justice and the just ruler”: 98. Absolute power is not only about the exercise of power over the military; it encompasses also matters of religious law, in order to promote uniformity in the growing empire. This counsel of having a ruler with absolute power is found in Ibn al-Muqaffaʿʿs *Risāla al-ṣaḥāba* which was offered rather late, since earlier the Caliph ʿUmar b. ʿAbd l ʿAzīz had sent letters to different territories to decree that each province decides on matters of law based on the consensus of the doctors of law. See G. Makdisī, *The rise of colleges* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 106.

The failure of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ to persuade the caliph to supersede the personal judgments of the jurists shows how advanced the jurists had become through their *madhhabs*. Even during the *miḥna* initiated by Caliph al-Maʾmūn in 833 CE to impose a state-like dogma could not overcome the strength of the religious science of *fiqh* by the *ʿulamāʾ*. See Al-Azmeh, *Muslim kingship*, 101.

³⁷⁷ Lambton, “Justice in medieval”: 99.

³⁷⁸ In the late period of Būyid rule, the *faqīh* al-Māwardī (d. 1082/474) wrote a book on jurisprudence *Aḥkām al-sultāniyya* which is devoted to government and its operation from a legal point of view. It speaks of how a ruler’s sense of justice contributes to the stability of the state. Though *al-Aḥkām* does not belong to the *Mirrors*, it shows the shift in rulership from one based on a ruler’s knowledge alone to a balance between knowledge and justice. See Donald Little, “A new look at al-Aḥkām al-sultāniyya”, *The Muslim World*, 64 (1), 1974: 2. See Christopher Melchert, “Māwardī, Abū Yaʿlā, and the Sunnī revival”, in *Prosperity and stagnation: some cultural and social aspects of the ʿAbbāsīd Period (750-1258)*, edited by Krzysztof Koscielniak (Cracow: Orientalia Christiana Crasoviensia, 2010), 47.

“justice”, for its absence reflects badly on in the practice of religion and the stability of the state. Religion and politics were strongly intertwined in the ruler so that any criticism against his praxis of faith became *de facto* a political issue.³⁷⁹

The corruption of a ruler is considered in the *Qābūs-nāma*, which advocates that a sultān should be distinguished from the ordinary person by his exercise of power and the authority to inflict punishment (an aspect of justice).³⁸⁰ Kay Kāʿūs clearly spells out the qualities necessary in an ideal ruler if he is to protect the state from harm and deal effectively with the enemy, “Always therefore, be planning how to destroy your enemy before he begins to take action over destroying you.”³⁸¹

The author warns:

Never be off your guard concerning a single enemy. A thousand friends may be neglectful of their solicitude for you, but that one enemy of yours will never forget his hatred.³⁸²

Justice entails punishing enemies of the state, for punishment is a sign of effective and just authority. The stability of a state relies on the ruler who knows his enemies and deals with them expeditiously. Later *Mirrors* literature includes social and political change as reasons to modify acts of the government,³⁸³ noting that works of jurisprudence and philosophy are abstract in their ideals and should not be the only criteria for change in a discourse on political leadership.

A final word on the *Mirrors*: this genre welds the philosophical ideas of the philosopher-king with the jurists’ emphasis on the purity of Islam, which is conferred

³⁷⁹ Lambton, “Justice in medieval”: 103.

³⁸⁰ Lambton, “Justice in medieval”: 107.

³⁸¹ Kay Kāʿūs, *Qābūs*, 133.

³⁸² Kay Kāʿūs, *Qābūs*, 136.

³⁸³ Lambton, “Islamic mirrors”, 419.

on the caliphate. While the *Mirrors* highlight *‘ilm* as the great virtue of a leader in earlier versions, later versions promote *‘adl*.

At this point in this chapter, it is imperative to define just leadership in the context of the eighth and eleventh centuries. The *Sharī‘a* and the concept of kingship (borrowed from pre-Islamic Persia) had become established pillars in the political institution of medieval Islam. Accordingly: before the eleventh century, justice required a Muslim ruler in his capacity as the highest state authority to carry out clemency or punishment based on the Islamic tradition of *‘ilm* alone (Ibn al-Muqaffa⁶); by the eleventh century, justice could no longer be assumed without proper checks. From that time on a bond between *‘ilm* and *‘adl* became the criterion for just leadership (Kay Kā‘ūs). To keep order in his state a politically just ruler must use state craftsmanship to maintain proper conduct in government. This suggests that political justice must comply with two levels of authority: God’s law and the law administered by the temporal, legitimate ruler.

The *History* of al-Ṭabarī and the *‘Arāʾis* of al-Tha‘labī offer different perspectives on just leadership. Instead of the direct instructions offered in *Mirrors*, al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha‘labī reflect on the history of certain prophets in an effort to encourage the caliphs of their time to emulate the qualities displayed by the prophets as great leaders. To determine what qualities of leadership al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha‘labī promote in their *qīṣaṣ*, and to establish to what extent each of the two interacts with the early and later *Mirrors*. I will look at each of the prophet-leaders in turn.

3.3 Joseph and just leadership: a view from the centre

3.3.1 The political meaning behind the dream³⁸⁴ motif in al-Ṭabarī's Joseph

Joseph is an interpreter of dreams more than a dreamer in the narrative of al-Ṭabarī. It is interesting to note that Joseph's initial dream about the sun, the moon and the eleven stars bowing to him is presumed to be known to the reader and consequently the author makes no introductory mention of it. This is unique to al-Ṭabarī's narrative (not in al-Tha'labī). This dream of cosmic bowing is first mentioned by Joseph's brothers shortly after they throw him into the well, when they shout "Let the sun and the moon and the eleven stars give you company." Joseph's reply, "I did not see anything," suggests a denial of ever having had a vision-dream of this sort.³⁸⁵ But why does Joseph's dream cause such an angry response? It is implied in the narrative that the story of the dream has been circulating among the brothers who see it as a threat to them. To bow to a younger sibling is culturally unacceptable at that time. However, al-Ṭabarī's omission of the first dream means that the view from the centre does not see Joseph as a cosmic figure - not even metaphorically. Therefore the leadership expected from Joseph is freed from any supernatural personification. The humanity of Joseph remains the essential focus for his prophetic mission and leadership.

³⁸⁴ Both the Qur'ān and al-Ṭabarī refer to a dream as *ru'ya* and not *ḥilm*. *Ḥilm* in particular could mean a dream or seeing something during sleep, but the actual meaning of *ḥilm* relates more to gentleness, patience, self-control and maturity. See Charles Pellat, "Ḥilm", in *ET*², volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 390. In comparison, the *ru'ya* in the tradition associates dreams with prophets who are seers even in their sleep. See T. Fahd, "Ru'ya", in *ET*², volume 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 645. In the *Arā'is*, the *ru'ya* is likewise used to refer to Joseph's two dreams while he is sleeping. See Al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is*, 185.

³⁸⁵ They mocked him saying, "Call on the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars to keep your company." See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 201 / *History*, volume 2, edited by William Brinner, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 150. Joseph's denial of his dream in al-Ṭabarī's narrative shows that he is following al-Suddī's account, not the Qur'ānic narrative.

The young Joseph's denial of the vision-dream could also be considered psychological and defensive – the fear of being isolated from the security of his father's love for him and a fear that because of their jealousy his brothers will do him harm. The narrative contrasts the human despair of a young boy with the hope of a future prophet, for it is inside the well that Joseph receives his first revelation that one day he will remind his brothers of their deed against him.³⁸⁶ This revelation tells Joseph that he will survive the isolation inside the well. Al-Ṭabarī uses the story of the well to teach the readers something about revelation as a source of hope in the midst of despair.

At the end of the narrative, when Joseph and Jacob are reconciled, justice is actualised. His entire family bow to him as the prophet-king, and Joseph mentions to his father that the dream of old is now fulfilled.³⁸⁷ The author uses the dramatic structure of *dénouement* at the end of the narrative to resolve the conflicts caused by Joseph's early ordeals and to show how adversity can be overcome.

This technique of writing suggests something about the context of al-Ṭabarī's life in Baghdād. It seems that al-Ṭabarī is uncomfortable giving much information about Joseph at the beginning of the narrative, lest he be perceived by the Ḥanbalīs to favour Joseph over the other prophets, especially the Prophet Muḥammad. Further, dreams were more the language of mystics³⁸⁸ than of traditionalists at that time. Mystics were not yet entirely accepted in early tenth-century Baghdād. This fact alone causes al-Ṭabarī to put less focus on a mystical theme of dreams lest he face

³⁸⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 201 / *History*, volume 2, 150-51.

³⁸⁷ The dream is only referred to at the very end of al-Ṭabarī's account. See *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 218 / *History*, volume 2, 183.

³⁸⁸ Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī refer to "dream" in terms of *ru'ya* or vision with respect to Joseph. See *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 201, 208 & 218; cf. The Arabic text of *ʿArāʾis al-majālis*, 110. For mystics, the *ru'ya* includes messages of warning or pieces of advice. See H. Daiber, "Ru'ya" in *EF*, volume 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 644-46.

persecution. In addition, Joseph's dream may sound too radical for the traditionalists—obedience to someone other than God. Al-Ṭabarī's narrative technique therefore reinforces the role of God by placing Him at the centre of the story, rather than Joseph, the ruler. However, by conviction al-Ṭabarī was not a Ṣūfī in orientation which explains for not dwelling on mystical side of Joseph. One should not expect a non-Ṣūfī oriented Muslim to portray a narrative prophetic figure like Joseph with excessive mystical expressions. In fact, al-Ṭabarī's Joseph is not necessarily a mystic.

While in prison in Egypt, Joseph interprets the king's dream showing the first sign of his leadership potential, and earning him favour with the king. Joseph then asks the king to vindicate his unjust imprisonment prior to being released.³⁸⁹ The king, realising his innocence, grants Joseph's request and asks for an audience with him.

It is Joseph's ability to interpret dreams which places him on the first rung of this ladder to leadership. Joseph advises the king that the seven years of famine foretold in the dream calls for immediate action during the current years of prosperity otherwise Egypt will not weather the famine. His counsel earns the trust of the king and the people of Egypt and Joseph is given the grain resources of Egypt to oversee, a position of great importance. Joseph proves to be a just leader who rules with generosity and forgiveness, without any serious flaw in character and judgement.³⁹⁰ Joseph's leadership is marked by two characteristics: his ability to interpret a dream and the wisdom to implement the vision of the king.

³⁸⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 208 / *History*, volume 2, 164.

³⁹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 209 / *History*, volume 2, 165-166.

This dream motif touches on the issue of security in al-Ṭabarī's time, when the caliphs were concerned for their safety – the move to the city fortress of Sāmarrā³ and their subsequent return to Baghdād. However the successive caliphs were more concerned with power and its embellishments than with reading the signs of their times—the political and religious changes already taking shape within their empire as a result of the rise and influence of the *‘ulamā’* and the army. The caliphs and their advisors focussed on outward display of leadership, constructing elaborate palaces and new mosques, which they financed through taxes from territories within the empire. Their main concern was tax revenues to finance their public image, not the future direction of their leadership. In al-Ṭabarī's time the empire was changing and its caliphate was losing its vision and its power over its army. For example, it seems that nothing warned the caliphs about the possibility of the Būyids taking over Baghdād in the near future. This lack of foresight presents injustice against the caliph's territorial power and the citizens who were under his care. Hence, one can read in his narrative of Joseph an implied criticism of the caliphate's political short-sightedness regarding the expanding Islamic world. Unlike a caliph, Joseph in the narrative foresees future challenges and acts upon them with prudence.

3.3.2 The political implications behind the “shirt” motif in al-Ṭabarī's story of Joseph

Al-Ṭabarī's narrative of Joseph uses the shirt image four times; all four occasions are taken from al-Suddī (d.744/126) whose work is trusted by al-Ṭabarī. The first reference comes when Joseph's step-brothers as an organised group

(*ʿUṣba*)³⁹¹ strip young Joseph of his shirt just before they force him, his hands tied, into a well in the middle of the desert. He pleads for mercy and asks for the return of his shirt, which is denied. Joseph is left alone, half naked inside a dark well. Al-Ṭabarī’s dramatic telling of the story of the young Joseph depicts a scene of despair and helplessness—a young boy vulnerable to violence and sold as a slave to a passing caravan. The well serves as a tomb for Joseph’s first episode of his life, marking an end to his protected life and his childhood. For the first time Joseph is vulnerable to the harsh realities of life—ripped from the security of his family and his father’s love and stripped of his shirt. Al-Ṭabarī uses this scene to symbolize the end of one identity and the beginning of another, his life as a slave to be bought and sold.

The second reference to a shirt comes when Joseph is living as a slave in the house of Potiphar and Raʿīl. Joseph is now a handsome young man, vulnerable to the desires of Raʿīl. She is besotted by his charms and wishes to seduce him. Her attempt at seduction is thwarted by Jacob who appears as a vision to Joseph during the seduction attempt. Joseph tries to flee but she pursues him and before he reaches the door she tears his shirt at the back. The shirt becomes a symbol of aggression and worldly temptation against a prophet. Raʿīl persuades Potiphar to have Joseph imprisoned, and just as the episode in the well represents the ripping away of Joseph’s old life as a slave, and the beginning of a new stage, the episode in the locked room and his imprisonment represent the beginning of the next phase of his life.

³⁹¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 201 / *History*, volume 2, 149.

Al-Ṭabarī uses the shirt symbol two times more toward the end of the narrative as part of the reconciliation between Joseph and his family. Judah (the same brother who earlier in the narrative had taken Joseph's shirt stained with the blood of a beast to Jacob to falsely prove that Joseph was devoured by a wolf),³⁹² has been asked by Joseph to take his shirt to Jacob—linking the present to the past.³⁹³ Jacob recognises Joseph's unique scent and his grief is transformed to joy, which signifies not just Joseph's personal reconciliation with his family but also his political power and leadership; it is a power which reconciles the two regions of Canaan (where Jacob lives) and Egypt. The image of the shirt can be compared with the sending of a diplomatic letter from a ruler (Joseph) to a respected head of a family clan (Jacob) in another country. This diplomatic image is further strengthened by the arrival of Jacob in Egypt and his warm welcome by Joseph, as its ruler.

The "shirt" motif, when seen in the context of al-Ṭabarī's Baghdad in the late ninth- to early tenth-century, seems to represent the successive temporal stages that Joseph goes through in his transition from a secure childhood, to slavery, to imprisonment, to rule and to reconciliation. The shirt used as a literary device illustrates the harsh realities of life and the trials faced even by a prophet. It also reflects the caliphate state in Baghdād in its stages of transformation—from one that is powerful and located at the 'centre' of things to one vulnerable to betrayal and the destabilisation of power. Al-Ṭabarī's casting of the story of Joseph expresses hope that as long as the caliphate remains faithful to its mandate and acts prudently,

³⁹² Al-Ṭabarī chooses to mention the stained shirt for the first time at the end of the narrative in order to make a sharp contrast with the authentic shirt which carries the fragrance of Joseph.

welcoming other Muslim regional territories as one *umma*, it will be transformed once again into a strong and vibrant state.

3.4 Joseph: al-Tha‘labī’s view from the edge

3.4.1 The dream motif in Joseph

The Nīshāpūrī author uses the dream motif in his narrative for two purposes: to show the prophetic identity of Joseph and his superiority over his brothers. In the *‘Arā’is* he includes two dreams (al-Ṭabarī has only one).³⁹⁴ Both dreams have supernatural elements. In the first dream, the branch that Gabriel plants for Joseph grows up to heaven, while the planted branches of his brothers wither in time.³⁹⁵ The second dream – the cosmic bowing – illustrates Joseph as a figure whose robe illuminates the entire earth.³⁹⁶ In contrast to al-Ṭabarī’s Joseph, al-Tha‘labī’s Joseph is a strong cosmic figure endowed with supernatural qualities which his brothers do not have; this superiority informs the reader that Joseph is chosen by God for future leadership.

In the view from the edge, Joseph has a special place in the narrative.³⁹⁷ Al-Tha‘labī borrows from the Night Journey³⁹⁸ of the Prophet Muḥammad— Adam holding his son whom he called Joseph (because Adam was entrusted with the task of naming all creatures).³⁹⁹ According to the story, Joseph is the most beautiful

³⁹⁴ The second dream is about the branch planted by Gabriel for Joseph. This branch grows up to heaven and is fruitful while the branches of his brothers all wither in time.

³⁹⁵ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 110 / *Tales*, 186.

³⁹⁶ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 110 / *Tales*, 186.

³⁹⁷ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 108-109 / *Tales*, 183-84.

³⁹⁸ This is the Prophet Muḥammad’s mystical vision of the different stages of heaven in which prophets are ranked. Joseph is ranked sixth and appears like a crowned king with thousands of angels to each side of him. Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 108 / *Tales*, 183.

³⁹⁹ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 109 / *Tales*, 183.

person ever created, with a birthmark of the moon on his forehead.⁴⁰⁰ Those who see him are awed by his beauty and bow down to him. The fact that al-Tha°labī compares him to the creation of Adam (the first prophet, who because of his sin has lost two-thirds of his beauty to Joseph),⁴⁰¹ suggests that al-Tha°labī hovers at the edge of a new theological view of Joseph. This is a prophet who resembles Adam yet is pure of heart. He is no ordinary prophet; rather, he carries much of the primordial beauty of the first man in creation. Perhaps this represents a fresh start for humanity in the person of a leader with complete purity of heart and moral integrity.

Al-Tha°labī also makes a connection between the dreams of Joseph and prophecy; he borrows this idea from the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muḥammad, who once said that dreams are “the noblest part of prophecy.”⁴⁰² The young Joseph of al-Tha°labī, by virtue of this particular *ḥadīth*, is a prophet endowed with the revelatory ability to interpret dreams. It is in his sleep that Joseph is fully receptive to God’s messages, and accordingly is able to interpret properly the dreams of others and to foretell future events. Jacob is also able to interpret dreams. Jacob dreams that the young Joseph is about to be devoured by ten wolves⁴⁰³ but the earth swallows him first – an indirect reference to Joseph’s experience in the well.

According to al-Tha°labī’s take on the story, how does Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams influence his leadership? As a literary device, the two dreams in al-Tha°labī’s narrative predict that Joseph will be a leader worthy of awe and respect. However, the dreams give no teaching detail of what Joseph may proclaim as a prophet. Likewise, the ability to interpret dreams is not prophesied in Joseph’s

⁴⁰⁰ Al-Tha°labī, *°Arā°is*, 109 / *Tales*, 184.

⁴⁰¹ Al-Tha°labī, *°Arā°is*, 109 / *Tales*, 183.

⁴⁰² Al-Tha°labī, *°Arā°is*, 124 / *Tales*, 206.

⁴⁰³ Al-Tha°labī, *°Arā°is*, 112 / *Tales*, 188.

dreams, so he has no idea of what awaits him in the future. He does know, however, that he is expected to be a leader and that he has to be cautious in sharing this information with anyone but his father.

Al-Thaʿlabī matches al-Ṭabarī in his story of Joseph’s ascent to leadership: Joseph is in prison when he is asked to interpret the king’s dream; Joseph’s interpretative skills are given a higher profile in the al-ʿArāʾis than in al-Ṭabarī’s account. The king meets his match in Joseph since both of them speak seventy languages.⁴⁰⁴ There is also a religious designation of Joseph as a *ḥāfiẓ* (one who has memorised the Qurʾānic *āyāt*) and a *ʿālim* (expert in religious knowledge), qualities with which al-Thaʿlabī seems to promote Joseph’s credentials to manage the grain resources of Egypt.⁴⁰⁵ One wonders what these two qualities have to do with the economic management of Egypt’s grain resource. In fact they do not, but they work to gain unfailing trust and awe from others. Both the qualities of a *ḥāfiẓ* and a *ʿālim* touch on the infallible expertise of a religious leader. Al-Thaʿlabī seems to formulate a view of a strong and pragmatic leadership based on religious training despite the fact that the narrative gives no detail about Joseph’s religious training (who taught him the Qurʾān for example, though he has received some revelation). Al-Thaʿlabī is subtly touching on two aspects of the *imāmate*⁴⁰⁶ common to the Shīʿī conception: the infallible religious guidance of an *imām* and his political participation, though they (the Twelvers) admit that only the Prophet Muḥammad and ʿAlī were political

⁴⁰⁴ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 126 / *Tales*, 209-210.

⁴⁰⁵ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 127 / *Tales*, 211.

⁴⁰⁶ In Persia at the time of al-Thaʿlabī the Imāmīs became the Twelvers in the tenth and eleventh centuries; they were originally ʿAlids and they proposed that an *imām* is a bearer of saving knowledge of the *ḥadīth* and the Qurʾān. They also advocated the path of quietism without causing a political revolution. Al-Thaʿlabī’s Joseph seems to fit nicely the quietist persona and the religious elements of the *imāmate* of the Twelvers. See Crone, *Medieval Islamic*, 110-124.

imāms.⁴⁰⁷ Perhaps al-Tha^clabī is sympathetic to the Shī^cī view of leadership.

However, Joseph in the narrative is neither a political activist nor a usurper, yet he reaches to the highest political office in Egypt with the credentials of political astuteness and spiritual excellence, not unlike a prophet-*imām*.

Joseph's interpretation of the king's dream reveals that there will be a famine in seven years and that Egypt must begin to prepare itself immediately. Joseph is appointed by the king to lead Egypt through the crisis. The king's trust in Joseph deepens during this time of preparation and he rewards Joseph by crowning him as a king of Egypt.⁴⁰⁸ Al-Tha^clabī treats this coronation as an important indicator of the integrity of Joseph's prophetic life:

The king called him [Joseph] and set his own crown on his head, girded him with his own sword, and adorned him with his signet-ring. He ordered that a throne of gold be made for him, embellished with crowns made of pearls and amethysts, covered with a cupola of silk brocade.⁴⁰⁹

Therefore there are two contextual issues in al-Tha^clabī's narrative of Joseph. First the view from the edge is receptive to dreams in connection with prophecy and with the royal personification of a cosmic Joseph who is both a political leader and a prophet. Historically, the region of Khurāsān was monarchical; further, mystics flourished in the region. In his narrative al-Tha^clabī melds his historical Khurāsānī culture with the Ṣūfī activities in the region. Al-Tha^clabī was not a Ṣūfī; he was comfortable incorporating the monarchical elements with the dream sequence in his narrative of Joseph. However, given the asceticism of the Ṣūfīs al-Tha^clabī neither declares his narrative Joseph as a Ṣūfī nor does he describe him as a master of a Ṣūfī

⁴⁰⁷ See Crone, *Medieval Islamic*, 111 & 123.

⁴⁰⁸ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 127-128 / *Tales*, 211.

⁴⁰⁹ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 128 / *Tales*, 211.

order, rather he crowns him as king of Egypt. The political justice of al-Tha^clabī's Joseph has to be seen through the life-transition of a prophet-slave to a prophet-king.

Shortly after Joseph is crowned in the narrative, the famine in Egypt starts to deplete the storerooms and larders of the Egyptians to the point where they have to sell all their goods to buy grain from Joseph.⁴¹⁰ Eventually Joseph owns all of Egypt. Being a good and just ruler, Joseph returns the Egyptians' property to them to ensure the common good of all Egyptians:

But Joseph said, 'I swear by God and in your presence [the other king of Egypt] that I shall set free all the people of Egypt, and shall return to them their properties, their slaves, and their children.'⁴¹¹

3.4.2 The political meaning behind the "shirt" motif in al-Tha^clabī's Joseph

Al-Tha^clabī uses wider sources than just al-Suddī and includes more of the tradition (weaker or unconventional *ḥadīth* sources) in his story of Joseph. He inserts the story of the Prophet Muḥammad's mystical journey (*Isrā'*) to the seventh heaven according to Ka^cb al-Aḥbār (d.653/32)⁴¹², to indicate that the Prophet sees Joseph clothed with a shirt of splendour (*qamīṣ al-bahā'*).⁴¹³ Al-Tha^clabī highlights the beauty of Joseph, who resembles Adam before he sins.⁴¹⁴ From the beginning of the narrative, Joseph is presented as wearing a heavenly garment, and this shirt becomes a symbol of a just leader marked by holiness. Joseph is well loved and one close to God through holiness.

Al-Tha^clabī's story of Joseph in the well varies significantly from that of al-Ṭabarī. When Joseph is put inside the well he begs his brothers to return his shirt

⁴¹⁰ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 128 / *Tales*, 213.

⁴¹¹ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 129 / *Tales*, 213.

⁴¹² Formerly a Jew who converted to Islam.

⁴¹³ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 108 / *Tales*, 183.

⁴¹⁴ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 108 / *Tales*, 183.

which they have taken, for he wishes to use it as a shroud for his burial. This dramatic rendition of the first tragedy of Joseph is marked by despair, for Joseph believes he is at the end of his life and that the well has become his tomb. However, his despair is short-lived.⁴¹⁵ Two miracles occur inside the well that night; first, the water in the well becomes sweet for his refreshment, and second, the well shines with light from Joseph's presence. Joseph is no longer in the dark and his thirst is quenched. God sends the angel Gabriel to comfort Joseph and to clothe him with a heavenly-knit shirt inherited from his prophetic ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.⁴¹⁶ The ambiance of the well changes from darkness to light, from shroud wrapping to heavenly shirt of prophetic honour. This narrative detail portrays Joseph with prophetic authority and supports the veracity of his first two dreams. Al-Tha^clabī clearly attaches to his Joseph the mantle or cloak rightly belonging to a living prophet in the midst of an unfortunate event in his life. The “well of sorrows”⁴¹⁷ is thus neither a burial place nor a place of despair but a place of prophecy.

Joseph's shirt also seems to represent injustice in al-Tha^clabī's narrative, since after he is captured and sold to the passing caravan, Joseph is presented in a slave-market with a pretty shirt to boost his selling price. Joseph is bought by Potiphar, treasurer of Egypt.

The other evidence of injustice is Joseph's torn shirt at the seduction scene. That the shirt is torn from the back rather from the front affirms Joseph's innocence, though this fact does not exonerate Joseph, as Ra^cīl has him imprisoned.

⁴¹⁵ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 113 / *Tales*, 190.

⁴¹⁶ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 113 / *Tales*, 190.

⁴¹⁷ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 113 / *Tales*, 190.

At the end of the narrative, the shirt motif re-surfaces when Joseph sends a shirt with his scent on it to his blind father. Al-Thaʿlabī equates the scent of Joseph to the aroma of heaven,⁴¹⁸ which indicates that prophets are of heaven, and this interweaves with the story of Joseph in the *Isrāʾ* account of Prophet Muḥammad who sees him in his *qamīṣ al-bahāʾ*. The fragrance of heaven is not mentioned in al-Ṭabarī’s narrative.

Jacob regains his sight when Joseph’s shirt touches his eyes; his grief for Joseph is at an end for the shirt confirms that Joseph is alive. Al-Thaʿlabī’s “shirt” symbol associates Joseph with his heavenly abode, a distinction which highlights Joseph’s status as a prophet.

It seems that the view from the edge looks to attire to identify social rank and function. Joseph’s shirt marks the prophet as higher than the Nīshāpūran elite in the social context of eleventh-century Khurāsān, since the *qamīṣ al-bahāʾ* is heavenly attire associated solely with Joseph. It suggests a status of holiness associated with the cosmic image with which al-Thaʿlabī describes Joseph. However, in Khurāsān, attire of the religious members of the society was part of identity- the cloaks and turbans (the Ṣūfīs⁴¹⁹ and the *qāḍīs*).

3.5 David and just leadership: a view from the centre

3.5.1 - Al-Ṭabarī’s David

A righteous heart and the fortitude to protect the Israelites from the threats of Goliath are the first signs of David’s leadership abilities. David in his youth is

⁴¹⁸ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 138 / *Tales*, 228.

⁴¹⁹ Not with the Malāmatīs who were the local mystics in Nīshāpūr. In Thaʿlabī’s David, the Malāmatīyya is discussed.

merciful towards animals. To protect his people, he challenges Goliath (Jālūt) who represents cruelty and oppression. David's courage and his desire to protect his people are qualities which gradually lead to his inheritance of the kingdom from Saul and the power to govern the Israelites.

David possesses two characteristics which make him a good leader, his righteous heart⁴²⁰ (*ṣalāḥ al-qulūb*) and his sense of duty to ensure the safety of the Israelites from foreign forces. But the integrity of his leadership is weakened by David's pride and his arrogance in thinking that he can dispense with God as his refuge.

His intense piety sustains his pride, and because his ancestry inspires him—the prophets⁴²¹ Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—he aspires to take his place among them. This desire becomes ambition and he requests of God a trial similar to those his ancestors endured to prove his worth. He fails the trial when, on a day of his worship, he is tempted by Bathsheba bathing, committing adultery and murder in his obsession to possess her. This is further discussed in the next two chapters.

The gravity of David's sins and his consequent lack of attention to his mandate to protect the Israelites are far from what is expected from a prophet who is expected to intercede with God on behalf of his people to God, and from a king who must be vigilant and protect his subjects from the common enemy. Because of his acts, al-Ṭabarī suggests David fails to be ranked equally among his ancestors. For al-Ṭabarī, his failure is not just moral but also political; he is no longer fit to be a king. In essence he becomes a threat like Goliath because he pursues his own ambition and

⁴²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 281 / *History*, volume 3, translated by William Brinner (New York: SUNY Press, 1991), 141. This is according to the source from the tradition by Ibn Zayd.

⁴²¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 282 / *History*, volume 3, 144.

obsession rather than providing proper protection to his people. It even requires a divine intervention from God before David realizes what he has done.⁴²² This is the turning point in the narrative, for David in great distress begins his lament at the expense of leading his kingdom. David loses the trust of his people; God even prevents him from building a temple to honour Him.⁴²³

3.5.2 The political significance of the lamentation of David

David laments for forty days. The intensity of his grief and the ritual of lamentation, which takes the bodily form of prostrating in shame, are because of his belief that God's judgement "shows no favour".⁴²⁴ He feels that divine punishment is imminent. Al-Ṭabarī contrasts God's justice with God's actual forgiveness of David.⁴²⁵ Since David has been selected to be king because of his righteous heart, ability to sing psalms, and because he has laboured as a *khalīfa* (vicegerent) to ensure justice among all the people; with such endowed credentials, David finds it hard to accept God's forgiveness without expecting to be punished.⁴²⁶ But no punishment for David's sins is described in the narrative. (Adam by comparison was denied paradise.) Yet David's sin is equally grave, for he is a prophet. Al-Ṭabarī seems to suggest here that penance is an act of righteousness which can procure God's mercy

⁴²² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 283 / *History*, volume 3, 145.

⁴²³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 286 / *History*, volume 3, 151.

⁴²⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 283-84 / *History*, volume 3, 146.

⁴²⁵ If forgiveness is not granted, God will not look as merciful as is suggested in the Qur'ān. Al-Ṭabarī, "Lord! David committed a sin beyond what is between the East and the West. Lord! If you do not have mercy on David's weakness and forgive his sin, You will make his sin a subject of conversation among successive generations after him." See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 285 / *History*, volume 3, 149.

⁴²⁶ David discusses with Gabriel how his sin will be judged at the Last Judgment. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 285 / *History*, volume 3, 149.

and that it is unnecessary to remain in the perpetual fear of the divine punishment; it is David's penance that becomes David's hope.⁴²⁷

However, the effect of the lamentation remains ambiguous in al-Ṭabarī's narrative. Even though David is forgiven by his God, his righteous heart is no longer mentioned. Is he restored to righteousness? The narrative instead suggests that righteousness may make David a prophet and a king, but his pride causes him to lose his kingship. This seems to be the temporal punishment that David must endure for the rest of his life. Accordingly, David may remain a prophet, but not in the same rank as his ancestors:

People of scriptures claim that David continued to rule after Saul, until the incident between him and Uriah's wife occurred. When he committed that sin, David was busy with atonement for it, according to what they claim.⁴²⁸

Uriah becomes a martyr to David's lustful intent, though he has fought for David as a member of his military. This fact exacerbates the political injustice inflicted by David. As a king and as a political leader David no longer measures up to his ancestry, but as a prophet he is a model of the spirit of lamentation, for his heart recognizes the grave error he has committed. His lamentation suggests that he has not lost his righteousness; al-Ṭabarī suggests here that one can remain a prophet regardless of rank.

⁴²⁷ This includes the conversation between Uriah and God. Atonement for Uriah's blood on David's hands belongs only to God. Accordingly, Uriah gains paradise. See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 285 *History*, volume 3, 149.

⁴²⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 285 / *History*, volume 3, 149.

3.5.3 Al-Ṭabarī's context

How does al-Ṭabarī's portrayal of David relate to the context of his time?

David's conquest of Goliath gives hope to the reader of al-Ṭabarī's time that a caliph could stand up for his people and conquer effectively what threatens Islam. However, this political justice proved short-lived. Not every caliph in Baghdād during al-Ṭabarī's time was just in his leadership. The rebellion⁴²⁹ of the Zanj-slaves – from 865 to 880⁴³⁰ – reflects the unjust economic situation, for they were suppressed even if they were Muslims. Although Uriah in the narrative is not a slave but he was cheated like a slave so that his governor David gets what he wants, Uriah's beautiful wife.

In general, after 892, some caliphs had become more concerned about their public image, acquisitions of properties, and the lure of power became the priority than to rule justly. In addition, by the late ninth century, tax revenues from regional territories had declined and the caliphs had to rely on regional governors for financial support.⁴³¹ The Islamic empire was deteriorating into a group of regional territories rather than remaining a strong, centralized empire. This situation parallels David's loss of his political capacity to rule his kingdom due to the guilt of his moral failure. The deterioration of the empire under the caliph al-Muqtadir (d. 932/320) who proved to be a weak ruler but with extravagant lifestyle and could not function justly

⁴²⁹ Mårtensson says that al-Ṭabarī was against the Zanj and Qarmatian rebellions because they threatened the unity of the empire. See her "Al-Ṭabarī", 15. However, the Zanj were not rebelling solely to cause disunity in the empire but they revolted because of their unjust harsh conditions; this fact alone highlights the on-going injustice in the empire against those who serve both its economy and state.

⁴³⁰ See the entire "The revolt of the Zanj" in al-Ṭabarī, *History*, volume 36, translated by David Waines (New York: SUNY Press, 1992) which tells of the revolution under the caliphate of Muḥammad Ibn al-Wathīq (d.869/255) and his successor al-Muʿtamid (d.892/278).

⁴³¹ Albert Hourānī, *History of the Arabs* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 38.

for the empire.⁴³² It seems to the readers of al-Ṭabarī's David that caliphs cannot just rely on their prestige of their position but need to keep justice as a focus of their rulership.

3.6 David: a view from the edge

3.6.1 - Al-Tha'labī's David

Al-Tha'labī, like al-Ṭabarī, provides three key events in his narrative to illustrate the political justice of David's leadership: David's purity of heart as a selected *khalīfa*; the death of Goliath (Jālūt); and David's lust-driven act of acquiring Uriah's wife.

Al-Tha'labī's David differs from al-Ṭabarī's David in terms of his interior reality. Al-Ṭabarī portrays David as possessing a righteous heart (*ṣalāḥ al-qulūb*); al-Tha'labī describes David as having purity of heart - *tāhir al-qalb*.⁴³³ *Tāhir* in Arabic means pure or holy. Because of this purity he is selected as a prophet and anointed as king of the Israelites. What is the difference between a righteous heart and a pure heart? A "righteous" heart denotes a sense of morality that translates into good works; "purity" of heart relates to an altruistic intent – a reflective spiritual life. "Purity" suggests in a prophet a sense of innate holiness. The view from the edge already points to the uniqueness of David, not in the moral-practical sense, but in the sanctity already embedded in his life before he is anointed to lead Israel. Given this description by al-Tha'labī, the reader can see how purity of intention and just leadership are interrelated.

⁴³² K.V. Zetterstéen and C.E. Bosworth, "Al-Muḥtadīr billāh, Abu'l-Faḍl Dja'far", in *EF*², volume 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 541.

⁴³³ Al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is*, 275 / *Tales*, 462.

For example, in the story of Goliath the Israelites face an imposing military threat. It is David who faces Goliath with just three stones to protect him (each stone is attributed to one of David's ancestor-prophets: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).⁴³⁴ The strength of his faith in his ancestry gives him the courage to face Goliath and defeat him, saving the Israelites. Thus, al-Tha'labī too has David succeed through the death of Goliath. According to al-Tha'labī, this battle between David and Goliath parallels the story of al-Badr in the early days when the Prophet Muḥammad resided in al-Medina.⁴³⁵ By connecting the two events, al-Tha'labī links David to the story of the Prophet Muḥammad in and through the historical line of prophets. In his view history repeats itself by showing God's victory through His prophets. Hence, David's early success resonates with that of Muḥammad; Muḥammad's victory echoes David's.

Political justice becomes an issue for David as the narrative progresses. He is inspired by his prophetic ancestry and, aspiring to their greatness and leadership, he becomes ambitious.⁴³⁶ God does warn him about remaining pure of heart and not succumbing to his pride, but David ignores the warning,⁴³⁷ fails in his attempt to achieve greatness, and falls from God's favour. This is the first error in judgement David makes as a king, for he believes he is able to face trials without support or counsel. At first glance he "marvels" at the beauty of Bathsheba (*fa-ta'ajjaba dāwūd min ḥusnihā*) and allows his emotions to overcome his judgement.⁴³⁸ The meaning of *'ajaba* exceeds the translated "marvel" and actually hints at bewitchment/infatuation

⁴³⁴ Al-Tha'labī, *'Arā'is*, 271 / *Tales*, 456. This event of killing Goliath is within the story of Saul rather than in the story of David.

⁴³⁵ Al-Tha'labī, *'Arā'is*, 272 / *Tales*, 456.

⁴³⁶ David's failure to keep his heart pure can be attributed to his personal pride: he asks for similar afflictions of his ancestor-prophets to prove his piety. In his dialogue with the angel Gabriel, David's self-sufficiency for one hour shows his self-deception. See Marianna Klar, *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's*, 102-104.

⁴³⁷ Al-Tha'labī, *'Arā'is*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

⁴³⁸ There are several accounts, all of which al-Tha'labī includes in the bathing scene. See his *'Arā'is*, 279-80 / *Tales*, 468-470.

(*sihr* in Arabic). I think that Brinner's translation of *ʿjaba* as "marvel" does not capture David's condition of being bewitched by Bathsheba's beauty, to the point that he forgets his mission of prophecy and the integrity of his political leadership. He becomes obsessed with possessing her. The meaning of *sihr* makes more sense given how the narrative develops. David's infatuation with Bathsheba is so extreme that he can no longer reason or act justly. Protecting his people becomes secondary to his lust for another man's wife, to the point where he arranges for the husband to die, marking the beginning of his moral decay and abandonment of a true sense of justice. It is obvious that al-Thaʿlabī associates justice with purity of heart and injustice with the loss of self-control, pride and selfishness. Actually, therefore, the inner life of David in al-Thaʿlabī shows more facets than in al-Ṭabarī, including a more complex psychological personality.

There is another reason why infatuation (*sihr*) is more suitable than "marvel". When Uriah is killed, David shows no remorse.⁴³⁹ He remains focussed on acquiring Bathsheba, rather than on the consequences of his actions. Al-Thaʿlabī uses emotions or the lack of them to describe the various stages of David's infatuation for Bathsheba. David fails to comply with his prophetic mission, for his feelings are governed by his passion for and obsession with Bathsheba –David feels only apathy for Uriah. This negative use of emotion is followed by remorse when he is knocked out of his infatuation with Bathsheba.

⁴³⁹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 281-82 / *Tales*, 472.

3.6.2 David's lamentation in the 'Arā'is

Al-Tha^clabī gives the following drama of David's reaction when his sin is exposed. First, he prostrates for forty days in a ritual of penance without raising his head.⁴⁴⁰ Then a long passionate prayer reveals David's remorse and sorrow for what he has done despite that God has given him prophecy and privilege of a beautiful voice for praising God. After this lamented prayer, God grants David forgiveness, but He asks him to visit Uriah's tomb and to confess his sins to Uriah's soul. David confesses first that he has exposed Uriah to murder and later he tells him that Bathsheba is now his wife. Uriah accepts the first confession by saying that he is now exposed to paradise; but he remains silent about the second confession.⁴⁴¹ David's lamentation is intensified and weeps for thirty years, day and night.⁴⁴² He is in perpetual sorrow, despite God's forgiveness:

“O Lord, how come you forgive me while my companion [Uriah] denies me his forgiveness?” God replies, O David if he forgives you or does not forgive you I shall grant him on the Resurrection Day what his eyes did not see and his ears did not hear, and I will ask him if he is pleased as my servant. He [Uriah] will say, ‘From where this is granted given that I did not earn it by my deeds?’ I [God] will reply, ‘This is recompense on behalf of my servant David, and I will grant that he gives you to me [for my judgement].’ So David replies, ‘O Lord, now I know that you have forgiven me.’⁴⁴³

There are two questions arising from the drama of lamentation. Why is David not satisfied with God's forgiveness? After all he has lived through a forty day ritual of penance. He continues lamenting rather than overcoming his guilt and leading his kingdom. Second, is there not a compensation for Uriah losing his spouse to David? Perhaps Uriah's first response (being exposed to paradise) to David is sufficient for

⁴⁴⁰ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā'is*, 282 / *Tales*, 474.

⁴⁴¹ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā'is*, 284 / *Tales*, 476.

⁴⁴² Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā'is*, 285 / *Tales*, 477.

⁴⁴³ My translation from the Arabic text of *‘Arā'is*, 284. Cf. *Tales*, 476.

both of David's sins. This may be the case to the reader, but not to David. From David's point of view, he remains troubled about Bathsheba. It is this issue which extends his lamentation from forty days to a lifetime period of thirty years. Al-Tha'labī seems to point to the injustice done to Bathsheba by a leader of a kingdom – hence the crime is rather too serious. His political mandate to protect the citizens of his kingdom is tarnished for ever since he deliberately orchestrated to expose Uriah to murder for the goal of acquiring Bathsheba. He had no other reason for exposing Uriah to untimely death. It is the sin of failing to do justice. Unlike al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha'labī focuses more on the offense against Bathsheba to the point that it ruins the life of a leader and his leadership suffers. The power of a leader is not for his self gratification. The Nīshāpūran author is adamant that rulers do not act with injustice against any citizen for self-gratification. He has very high expectations of his rulers to live sound moral life; otherwise their credential to rule is eroded. The view from the edge stipulates that a ruler ought to be a moral authority along with political astuteness.

Regarding the second question, in the Islamic tradition those who die as martyrs will be granted *hourīs*⁴⁴⁴ in paradise. However, this gratification is not to undermine or cover up David's injustice against Bathsheba. Al-Tha'labī does not weave the *hourī* argument into his narrative because the issue is not a matter of compensation but the seriousness of a leader's injustice. It is al-Tha'labī's advice that no ruler ought to dare acting as David does against Bathsheba in his narrative. David's long lamentation – half a lifetime – suggests that David remains a broken

⁴⁴⁴ Even though the Qur'ān speaks of the *houris* as heavenly virgins awaiting the righteous (Q 56:21-23, 34-9) al-Tha'labī says nothing about the *houris* for Uriah's martyrdom. See A.J. Wensinck and C. Pellat, "Ḥūr" in *EF*², volume 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 581.

man, psychologically incapable of overcoming his troubled soul, “The people came to visit David, thinking him ill. But the only thing wrong with him was his shame and fear of God.”⁴⁴⁵ His remaining days are spent in lament and fasting, and when he speaks to his people he spreads his hands so that they can read his sin which is branded into his right hand by God.⁴⁴⁶

In terms of justice, does David’s lament become part of his mandate of justice? There is a positive link between justice and lamentation. Lamentation amends the relationship between God and David. Forgiveness offers the prophet a new beginning or a second chance for purity of heart. Despite the fact that David laments his transgressions for thirty years, he is still allowed to build the foundation and erect the walls of God’s temple, although the privilege of setting its dome is reserved for Solomon.⁴⁴⁷ In contrast, even the partial building of the temple is denied for David in al-Ṭabarī’s narrative. In al-Tha‘labī, the lamenting David remains a prophet and a ruling king, though not a confident one.

3.6.3 The story of David in the context of al-Tha‘labī

Al-Tha‘labī’s portrayal of David reflects the author’s context in Nishāpūr. There is an aspect of the Karrāmīyya implicit in David’s dialogue with God. The Karrāmīyya promoted extreme trust⁴⁴⁸ in God and had built overly visible rituals in the *khānaqās* in Khurāsān for the practice of intense ascetic praxis.⁴⁴⁹ The intensity

⁴⁴⁵ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 286 / *Tales*, 479.

⁴⁴⁶ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 286 / *Tales*, 479.

⁴⁴⁷ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 308 / *Tales*, 516.

⁴⁴⁸ Malamund, “The politics of”, 42.

⁴⁴⁹ See F. De Jong, “Malāmatiyya”, in *ET*², volume 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 223, where the author mentions the reaction of the Malāmatīs to the Karrāmīs’ ritual piety. See also Abū ‘Alā’ ‘Afīfī, *Al-Malāmatiyya wa-l-ṣūfiyya wa ahl al-futūwwa* (Cairo: Dar iḥyā’ al-kutub al-‘arabiyya, ‘Īsa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa sharika’ūhu, 1945), 13.

denotes order and structure already in place. In these *khānaqās*, one can imagine the discipline required from the residents living there. Things were run rather with structure and order; al-Thaʿlabī’s David seems to have a similar discipline illustrated in the narrative because he deliberately spends a day, every three days, in complete worship, reciting the Qurʾān and reading spiritual material. This image of an orderly fashion type of worship must have echoed the Karrāmī spiritual life in the times of al-Thaʿlabī.

In contrast to the ostentatious asceticism of the Karrāmiyya, the Malāmatiyya emerged in the ninth century Khurāsān to demote all visible religious rituals. Religious spirit is meant to be a private matter. The Malāmatiyya offered inward-looking self-discipline, thus seeking purification against carnal desires. The real enemy of Malāmatiyya is the soul or *nafs* which should be under constant scrutiny to avoid any pride of one’s deeds even if they are good deeds. In al-Sulamī’s epistle of the Malāmatiyya, he shows that the first principle is *tathlīl al-nafs wa taḥqīrihā*.⁴⁵⁰ Both *tadhhlīl* and *taḥqīr* are negative in meaning which respectively stand for ‘degradation’ and ‘disdain/contempt’. However, *tadhhlīl* also refer to ‘conquering’ the despised self, though this is debatable in the case of David because his sin marks him for life. In al-Thaʿlabī, David before he falls for Bathsheba was “extremely pious and pleased with his deeds”⁴⁵¹ which stands at odds with the ascetic principle of the Malāmatiyya against the *nafs*. God’s advice to David is *iḥtaris ʿalā l-ṣabr*⁴⁵² which Brinner translates as “beware and be patient”⁴⁵³ and is calling David for self-awareness in the coming trial.

⁴⁵⁰ Al-Sulamī’s “Risāla al-Malāmatiyya” in ʿAfīf’s *Al-Malāmatiyya*, 90.

⁴⁵¹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

⁴⁵² Al-Thaʿlabī *ʿArāʾis*, 279 .

⁴⁵³ Al-Thaʿlabī, *Tales*, 469.

The narrative description of David is complex. In his worship days, he reads about his ancestry and aspires to be like them, even to be counted as great as they were. In addition, David grows in his pride that no one worships like he does; his piety has no equal and David becomes self-conceited and takes pleasure in all the good deeds he has achieved. Both of these are anathema to the Malāmatiyya precepts:

The reason for this is that David was extremely pious and was pleased with his work. So he said: ‘Is there anyone on Earth who behaves as I do?’ Gabriel came to him and said: ‘Indeed, God says: ‘I admire your devotion, but pride consumes acts of devotion. If you admire yourself a second time, I will entrust you with your own affairs.’ David said: ‘My Lord, entrust me with my own soul for one year’. God said: “That is quite a long time. ‘ David said: ‘Then a month?’ God said: That is still much, too.’ David said: ‘Then a week?’ God said: ‘That is still much.’ David said: ‘A day?’ God said: Too much,’ David said, ‘A moment? God said: ‘It is your affair, then.’⁴⁵⁴

The above quote is not found in al-Ṭabarī. Instead, al-Ṭabarī’s David feels more modestly that he could spend a whole day without doing an evil act.⁴⁵⁵ Al-Thaʿlabī gives an alternative but extreme side of David. The negotiation between David and God reveals the immensity of the pride and self-delusion of David to the point of his seeking independence from God because of his belief in his self-sufficiency. Even the “one moment” without trusting God seems to be a strong Karrāmiyya warning against such a stand; al-Thaʿlabī seems to be on the side of the Karrāmī teaching on *tawakkul* (trust). So having devotion to God and pride in one’s achievement is not a good mix. Al-Thaʿlabī personifies David as a victim of his pride and over-confidence of his sanctity. In this way, he offers his advice to leaders to be free from the religious hypocrisy and to avoid independence from God even for one moment.

⁴⁵⁴ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

⁴⁵⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 284 / *History*, volume 3, 146.

However, the lamentation of David shows a struggle between repentance and accepting a new beginning with God.

There is more than a whiff of the Malāmatiyya⁴⁵⁶ spirituality of blame in David's lamentation. David has changed from a proud confident leader to a self-blaming person with such severity that he gets stuck in the blame for a thirty year period. He lives to despise himself in his lamentation even though God grants him forgiveness. God's forgiveness does not comfort him. David allows in his lamented prayer to say things like⁴⁵⁷ "Woe to David if the veil is thrown off and it is said that this is David the sinner"; later he says, "Woe to David for his great sin which befell him, from which he learned nothing"; twice he mentions that his sin does not leave him, "When a garment is washed, its filth and squalor depart, yet this sin remains with me and does not leave" and "The entreaty has stopped, the tears have stopped, the worms have fallen off my neck and my sin is closer to me than my skin." He remains in perpetual blame and sees no freedom from the constant effect of his deed against Uriah and Bathsheba.

There is another active principle of Malāmatiyya in David's lament; this principle is allowing the interior (*baṭīn*) self to blame one's appearance (*ẓāhir*) and the appearance to blame the interior.⁴⁵⁸ What he sees in creation reminds him of his lowly interior state; David cries out saying "The birds praise you while I, the weak,

⁴⁵⁶ During al-Tha'labī's time, the major proponent of the Malāmatiyya was al-Sulamī (d.1021/411) whose *Risāla al-Malāmatiyya* situates the Malāmatiyya in the mystical tradition. The Malāmatiyya valued the virtues of chivalry and social altruism and promoted organized fraternities – *futūwwa* – within which the social marks of distinction or even a claim of inward spiritual progress were discouraged. *Futūwwa* was an enclosed circle of exclusive members with esoteric ability and included artists, craft makers and professionals who practised self-sacrifice (*īthār* in Arabic). See Sara Sviri, "Ḥakīm Tirmidhī and the Malāmatī movement in early Ṣūfism" in *Ṣūfism: critical concepts in Islamic studies*, edited by L. Ridgeon, volume 1 (London: Routledge, 2008), 145-170.

⁴⁵⁷ All the following quotes are from al-Tha'labī *ʿArāʾis*, 283 / *Tales*, 474-75.

⁴⁵⁸ Al-Sulamī's "Risāla al-Malāmatiyya" in ʿAfīfī's *Al-Malāmatiyya*, 91.

erring servant, do not follow your charge.”⁴⁵⁹ It is needless to say that al-Tha^clabī is using some of the self-blame spirituality in his David at the lowest ebb in David’s life. David becomes involved in a life-long process of fearing God’s Judgment, with a judicious critical attitude and persistent doubt of the effect of God’s mercy. The low self-esteem of David is quite alarming, after he has accepted that he cannot be in the same league as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The question is this: does al-Tha^clabī embrace al-Malāmatiyya spirituality or does he critique it in his David’s lamentation? In the first glance, al-Tha^clabī seems to get along with the idea of avoiding self-conceit and hypocrisy which Malāmatis constantly struggle against. David’s self-deception arises from his ambition to become a heroic figure in the faith like his ancestors. After all, he is accomplished warrior but not an accomplished leader like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob because he has no comparable trials like theirs. He fails the trial given to him and behaves like a warrior – kills Uriah and acquires Bathsheba. His lament is a struggle between repentance and accepting God’s forgiveness. He remains in perpetual lament unable to allow God’s forgiveness to take effect on him and to free him to resume his leadership. Rather, David continues in self-blame and focuses only on the effect of his sin rather than on God. He sees no goodness in him because his sins are closer to him than his skin.⁴⁶⁰ He is trapped for thirty years despite God’s forgiveness and the offer that David will be the first to drink from the chalice⁴⁶¹ on the Day of Resurrection. This constant reminder of his sin is rather al-Tha^clabī’s critique against the self-blame path. There is neither joy in David’s repentance nor forgetfulness of

⁴⁵⁹ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 475.

⁴⁶⁰ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 475.

⁴⁶¹ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 284 / *Tales*, 477.

his sin. This is in contrast to thoughts of other mystics; there is joy in repentance (al-Qushayrī's understanding of repentance)⁴⁶² and forgetfulness of one's sins (al-Junayd's understanding of repentance).⁴⁶³ It seems that al-Tha^clabī views more positively the ideal of Malāmatiyya (struggle against self-deception and hypocrisy) but not the process of excessive self-blame. A perpetual self-blame seems dysfunctional to liberate a repentant from his sinful past. If so, then al-Tha^clabī *de facto* advises his leaders to avoid two things: self-delusion and excessive guilt over a past sin, because both rely more on one's self than on God's grace and forgiveness.

3.7 Solomon: a view from the centre

3.7.1 Al-Ṭabarī's Solomon: a foremost leader

Al-Ṭabarī strongly believes in Solomon's *ʿilm* and his good judgement as a leader. He is able to bring other peoples to Islam, and to command the wind, the *jinn* and the demons.⁴⁶⁴ In his *History* the author begins his narrative of Solomon with a case study of a vineyard ("field" in the Qurʾān);⁴⁶⁵ this case involves sheep which do damage to the grape clusters in a vineyard.⁴⁶⁶ David judges in favour of the owner of the vineyard, but Solomon in his wisdom decides that the sheep should be given into the care of the vineyard owner so that he may benefit from them until such time as the owner of the sheep repairs the vineyard,— a settlement which benefits both parties. Al-Ṭabarī's Solomon proves a wiser arbiter than David (although the Qurʾān

⁴⁶² Al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risala al-qushayriyya fī ʿilm al-taṣawwuf*, 111.

⁴⁶³ It is taken from Sarraj, "Kitāb al-Luma'", in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, translated by Michael Sells (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 199.

⁴⁶⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 288 / *History*, volume 3, 154.

⁴⁶⁵ Q 21: 78-79. *Al-ḥarīth* in Arabic means agricultural field.

⁴⁶⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 287 / *History*, volume 3, 153.

sees them as equal in this regard).⁴⁶⁷ *Qist* (fairness) seems to be a basic part of Solomon's justice, in contrast to *ẓulm*.

Solomon the ruler is overshadowed by Solomon the prophet whose authority is highlighted in the narrative. Solomon is not trying to establish a political monarchy, for he will someday inherit his father's kingdom; rather he seeks to expand his dominion to promote Islam. In other words, his kingship is subservient to his prophetic goals. At least, this is al-Ṭabarī's direction in his narrative. According to an account by al-Qāsim b. al-Ḥasan (d.885/271), al-Ṭabarī provides a detailed list of Solomon's army⁴⁶⁸ which is stretched over one hundred *parasangs*: an army stretches over twenty-five *parasangs*; a group of *jinn* covers twenty-five *parasangs*; wild animals and birds cover the remaining fifty *parasangs*.⁴⁶⁹ Each time Solomon commands the wind to move him into new territories this entourage moves with him. His possessions include approximately one thousand houses of glass, one for each of his three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines. These details show a unique type of a ruler with a fantastical caravan-like throne capable of expanding into vast territories, yet subjugated to the reality of the prophetic role which Solomon performs with a power given by God, "Lo, I have increased your rule so that no creature can say anything without the wind bringing it and informing you."⁴⁷⁰

In his progression from the young Solomon who is consulted by his father on daily social matters – the vineyard for example- to his management over a

⁴⁶⁷ Q 21:78-79.

⁴⁶⁸ The term "army" is not used only in a military sense, but includes all those who serve Solomon in some particular way, such as for counsel. For example, the hoopoe searches for hidden water during Solomon's expedition to territories in the desert.

⁴⁶⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 288 / *History*, volume 3, 154. Each *parasang* is 5.6 km long in Persian measurement.

⁴⁷⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 288 / *History*, volume 3, 154.

continually expanding kingdom, al-Ṭabarī attempts to show the prophet's growth in political astuteness. The astuteness continues into the narrative story of Queen Bilqīs.

3.7.2 The political relationship between King Solomon and Queen Bilqīs in al-Ṭabarī's narrative

The just leadership in the story of Solomon and his counterpart, Queen Bilqīs, lies in the personal conduct of Solomon towards her and his hoopoe-bird. The hoopoe is a member of Solomon's entourage. Solomon learns of the dominion of Bilqīs through the hoopoe which cruises away from the flying entourage to explore by himself other parts of the desert in the direction of Yemen. There, the hoopoe converses with another hoopoe which serves Queen Bilqīs. The two hoopoes exchange information on their respective kingdoms and Solomon's hoopoe returns to Solomon's entourage to inform him about Bilqīs' dominion. Diplomacy between the two kingdoms now begins, each leader wondering how best to approach the other. It is rather interesting that two monarchs, unknown to each other, who are highly urbanised, make their first acquaintance in the desert.

Solomon is initially angry with his hoopoe for taking off from the rest of the entourage without explicit permission from him, despite that his servant-bird discovers a new kingdom ripe for Islam.⁴⁷¹ Solomon tests further his bird's counsel by sending him back to Bilqīs to deliver a *noble-letter* to her requesting her submission to his faith.

How does Bilqīs approach a king who is a prophet? What is Solomon's best approach in opening negotiations with a queen who is not a Muslim but a pagan who

⁴⁷¹ Bilqīs and her people worship the Sun instead. See Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 158.

worships the Sun? In Solomon's encounter with Queen Bilqīs, al-Ṭabarī is addressing a long-term issue in early Islam— to incorporate the concept of kingship within the Islamic framework of belief in one God. For Solomon, a political relationship with Bilqīs requires from her to convert to Islam, which is the purpose of the *noble letter*.⁴⁷² This letter contains the Qurʾānic verses of 27:29-31.⁴⁷³ Al-Ṭabarī's message to readers is the absolute universality of Islam, and through allegiance to Islam nations could receive diplomatic and economic benefits, in addition to the security of their vast power and strength. The view from the centre seems to promote the Islamic empire as a league of nations bound by one faith rather than an independent, disparate group of regional territories.

Bilqīs⁴⁷⁴ seeks the advice of her counsellors⁴⁷⁵ before approaching Solomon. She sends him some gifts to test if Solomon is an authentic leader. Solomon returns her diplomatic gifts which prompt Bilqīs to acknowledge his uniqueness and decides to meet him in person and cast some questions concerning Islam.⁴⁷⁶ While she is on her way, one of Solomon's demons steals her throne and places it before Solomon. Solomon, in his wisdom, sees the presentation of the throne as a test from God and resists the temptation to succumb to that throne, remaining loyal to his promises to

⁴⁷² Solomon is not absolutely certain of his hoopoe's testimony regarding Bilqīs; hence to test his loyalty Solomon sends this "noble letter" to the queen. The letter serves another purpose which is to ask for permission to proceed into Bilqīs' dominion. See W. Montgomery Watt, "The Queen of Sheba in Islamic tradition", in *Solomon & Sheba*, edited by James B. Pritchard (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1974), 97.

⁴⁷³ "In the name of God the Beneficent, the Merciful. Exalt not yourselves against me, but come to me as those who surrender."

⁴⁷⁴ The story of Bilqīs as found in al-Ṭabarī's *History* is summarized in Bilqīs Ibrāhīm al-Ḥiḍrānī, *Malikat Bilqīs* [Publisher is not listed] (1994), 99. In her book which has the approach of gender differences as given by the tradition, she describes that the major source of Bilqīs was by Wabb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 725/106) who portrays the queen as submissive to Solomon despite the fact that Bilqīs rules all of Yemen. See *eadem*, *Malikat Bilqīs*, 84.

⁴⁷⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 159.

⁴⁷⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 159-160.

God as a prophet.⁴⁷⁷ Bilqīs is at first apprehensive about kings for she has already experienced the havoc they cause once they enter new territories. She thirsts for a just king and this may be found in Solomon, hence her visit to him.

In their first encounter, Bilqīs tests Solomon's knowledge of his faith by her two questions. The first question was about the source of sweet water which is neither from heaven nor from the earth. Solomon answers that the sweet water which is neither from heaven nor from earth must be from the sweat of horses; she in return sees his wisdom. But when she tests his knowledge of God's colour⁴⁷⁸, Solomon steps down from the throne and prostrates –confusion controls him. The message is that the attributes of God are beyond the *ʿilm* of any prophet or believer. As a consequence of her questions, Solomon accepts Bilqīs as a convert to Islam.⁴⁷⁹ With this conversion, there is a harmony secured between the two monarchies but Solomon's, by the virtue of his status as a prophet of God, remains more politically dominant.

By becoming a Muslim believer, Bilqīs is no longer a politically independent governor; her dominion is now under Solomon. Al-Ṭabarī offers two different accounts of Bilqīs' embrace of Islam and obeisance to Solomon; one account, by Ibn ʿAbbās, refers to a marriage between Solomon and Bilqīs; the other, by Ibn Munabbih, reports that she marries the king of Ḥamdān⁴⁸⁰ and rules with him the

⁴⁷⁷ Q 27:40.

⁴⁷⁸ Al-Ṭabarī includes anthropomorphism in his writing. This is no surprise. By the tenth-century, Muslims had accepted elements of anthropomorphism into Sunni doctrines. See W. Williams, "Aspects of the Creed of Imam Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal: A study of anthropomorphism in early Islamic discourse", *International Journal of Middle East studies*, volume 34 (2002): 442.

⁴⁷⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *History*, volume 3, 161.

⁴⁸⁰ In South Arabia, today's Yemen, the people of Sheba were also known as *Tubba'* which is a name given to the Himyarite kings of south Arabia. See W. M. Watt, "The Queen of Sheba in Islamic tradition", 89.

region of Yemen,⁴⁸¹ with Solomon's permission. Al-Ṭabarī in this way metaphorically points out that all regional territories which embrace Islam are under the caliph in Baghdād because of his religious status as leader of the *umma*. Therefore a league of Muslim nations must still remain within the centralised authority of the Sunnī caliph in Baghdād. Al-Ṭabarī sees political harmony as possible provided that leaders of renegade territories convert to Islam under the one ruler, the caliph in Baghdād. Hence one type of Islam is emphasised to secure a just Muslim world.

Al-Ṭabarī does not consult Jewish and non-Sunnī sources. He also downplays the “kingdom” aspect of Solomon's dominion; for example he mentions almost nothing about the “temple” construction, which is a symbol of a religious monarchy. His view of Solomon's political justice is manifested in his show of clemency for the hoopoe which is responsible for the spread of Islamic faith to a new dominion, and by his diplomatic effort to win the Bilqīs' kingdom and her conversion to Islam. Al-Ṭabarī seems to advocate one universal Islam over regional, fragmented territories.

3.8 Solomon: a view from the edge

The Nīshāpūran author, in his narration of the story of Solomon as a king and prophet, inserts theological⁴⁸² stories which are not present in al-Ṭabarī's narrative. Al-Thaʿlabī heightens al-Ṭabarī's fantastical view.⁴⁸³ He also uses the narrative to

⁴⁸¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 292 / *History*, volume 3, 164.

⁴⁸² The story of Solomon and the phoenix is not part of my discussion because of its theological intent and does not relate to three themes of *just leadership, friendship* and *enmity*.

⁴⁸³ There is a summary of al-Thaʿlabī's account of Bilqīs. See Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 47-63.

present his theological stand against Mu^c tazilī thought⁴⁸⁴ which is replaced by some Ṣūfī wisdom⁴⁸⁵ and a traditionalist perception of prophets and leadership. The political justice of Solomon is largely influenced by his religious formation, his dialogues with an ant and the story of Bilqīs.

The author uses non-traditional sources – Jewish for example – in harmony with the Islamic sources. Like al-Ṭabarī he often quotes Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 725/106) and Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 770/152) who have considerable authority in the Islamic tradition. But al-Tha^clabī does not limit his sources only to the universally acceptable sources; the lesser known ones also reveal something about the author's context and his comprehensive knowledge of the wider tradition, for during the tenth and eleventh centuries, al-Tha^clabī had a wide range of written sources available to him, including al-Ṭabarī's written corpus.

3.8.1 The religious formation of Solomon in the 'Arā'is

Al-Tha^clabī commences with Solomon's religious formation. Solomon answers wisely thirteen questions given to him through divine revelation.⁴⁸⁶ But his wisdom is more esoteric than a scholar's *ilm*. Among his answers, Solomon speaks of the authority of the "heart" – a Ṣūfī concept – for either corruption or harmony resides within a leader's heart.⁴⁸⁷ This epitomises what differentiates a good leader from an evil one, and shows that Islam favours order over anarchy on three fronts: political, religious and social. The Prophet Solomon inherits his father's kingdom

⁴⁸⁴ See the story of the Phoenix regarding the human will versus fate, in al-Tha^clabī, *'Arā'is*, 297-304/ *Tales*, 498-505.

⁴⁸⁵ Al-Tha^clabī, *'Arā'is*, 290, 296-97 / *Tales*, 487, 495-496, 498.

⁴⁸⁶ Al-Tha^clabī, *'Arā'is*, 290 / *Tales*, 486-87.

⁴⁸⁷ It seems that al-Tha^clabī is embracing a Ṣūfī sense of justice.

and is expected to lead it⁴⁸⁸ towards political stability and social prosperity. The ability to achieve these two goals lies within the “heart” of the leader. Al-Thaʿlabī believes the heart to be the throne of authority and the fountain of wisdom of a leader. A state in order reflects the ordered “heart” of its ruler.⁴⁸⁹

Knowledge of the “heart” in the Ṣūfī tradition begins experientially or through the bodily senses, the lowest denominator of knowledge, and ascends to ultimate knowledge of the truth.⁴⁹⁰ Al-Thaʿlabī introduces the Ṣūfī training of the heart into the requirement for just leadership. For example, one sign of Solomon’s leadership as a prophet is his ability to learn from little creatures –one as tiny as an ant.⁴⁹¹ The superiority of al-Thaʿlabī’s Solomon lies in the wisdom of his “heart” which earns him his prominence among all the leaders of Israel.

3.8.2 Solomon and the ant

To be a just leader, Solomon must remain open to all creation and signs (*āyāt*), which can reveal wisdom. There is a cosmic influence on Solomon’s formation as a leader and in the development of his “heart”.⁴⁹² His dialogue with a lame ant, which he tries to remove from his body, indicates her strength of wisdom

⁴⁸⁸ Thaʿlabī quotes Muqātil to describe Solomon with greater dominion than David although Solomon is not as pious as his father. See al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa-l bayān*, volume 7 (Beirut: Dar ihyāʾ al-turāth al-ʿarabī, 2001), 193.

⁴⁸⁹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *Tales*, 487 / 290.

⁴⁹⁰ There are three domains of knowledge: right ethical behaviour pioneered by the jurists; right thinking, heralded by theologians; and right vision, which is the path of the Ṣūfīs. The “heart” is a major notion in Ṣūfism which denotes recognition of the truth at the deepest human awareness, the awareness of reality in a pre-cognitive way serving as the root of any ethical behaviour. Thus the “heart” is an authority described in the vision of reality which determines how a person acts from the depth of his being. See William Chittick, *Ṣūfism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 6-7.

⁴⁹¹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 296 / *Tales*, 495-496.

⁴⁹² In Thaʿlabī’s account, Solomon is respectful of creation and he knows the role of each creature in the universe. One way to keep control over them and secure their obedience to him is his capacity to allocate a function for each creature under his command – having control brings harmony to his dominion. See Lassner, *Demonizing*, 72.

and her appeal for justice when she says: “My skin is thin and my body is weak, yet you took me and threw me down.”⁴⁹³ When Solomon asks for forgiveness, she answers:

On condition that you do not look on the world with a covetous eye, and that you do not be immoderate in your appetites and in your laughter, and that no one will beg assistance because of your high rank to which you give generously.⁴⁹⁴

This is an education of the “heart”- a bezel of wisdom from a lame ant. It indicates to the reader that leaders and their subjects should relate to each other on a horizontal level. This dialogue offers two lessons with respect to justice and its political dimension. In the first instance, there is al-Thaʿlabī’s perspective of leadership: a leader must represent people of all social classes - the strong, the elite and the lower social members of his society. Al-Thaʿlabī suggests therefore that the political leadership in Nīshāpūr distribute its attention equally between the patrician and the peasant classes. This universality of service and just leadership would certainly have been at odds with the reality of al-Thaʿlabī’s time. The Ḥanafīs in Nīshāpūr were associated with the wealthy (patricians and landowners), and the Shāfiʿīs with the working class (craftsmen and artisans). Where did the Ṣūfīs fit in the social-political struggle in Nīshāpūr and Khurāsān? The Ṣūfīs mostly operated in the countryside among the peasants, and it is obvious that al-Thaʿlabī was concerned about the poor social class of his culture. In addition, Ṣūfīs in general were never associated with a *madhhab* in Nīshāpūr (or Baghdād), and were often in conflict with the Ḥanafīs⁴⁹⁵ and the *ʿulamāʾ* in general. This tension between the Ṣūfīs and the

⁴⁹³ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 296 / *Tales*, 495-96.

⁴⁹⁴ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 296 / *Tales*, 496.

⁴⁹⁵ Berkey, *The formation*, 235.

schools of jurisprudence must have been known to al-Tha^clabī and he therefore seems to take a more conciliatory path to address this type of tension in his narrative about Solomon through his use of the ant as a symbol of strength of wisdom, able to advise the king despite its lowly state. In this way the author suggests that the poor who are spiritually trained by Ṣūfīs can contribute wisdom to those in leadership and that respect should be shown for all Muslims regardless of their social status. A just leadership entails not just diplomatic relations with those serving in powerful positions, but includes fostering dialogue with all members of the society. However, al-Tha^clabī also believes that leaders are mandated to lead and must be obeyed. Al-Tha^clabī's sense of justice applies to all Muslims regardless of their economic, political or genealogical status. It is a political justice for all– a true sense of *‘adl*.

The dialogue between the ant and Solomon concerning the “crushing of hearts” as opposed to the “crushing of persons” is a further illustration of al-Tha^clabī's idea of justice and its association with the Ṣūfī tradition:⁴⁹⁶ “Go into your dwellings, ants, lest Solomon and his warriors unwittingly crush you.”⁴⁹⁷ Her warning to other ants disturbs Solomon who wants to know if he is perceived as an unjust leader.⁴⁹⁸ Her reply is a rather apologetic one. She explains that her ants may desire Solomon's many possessions and become distracted from glorifying God,⁴⁹⁹ a direct reference not only to the temptation of rulers of al-Tha^clabī's time for self-aggrandisement over good leadership but also to the poor to be rebellious or materialistic. Rather they need to keep to their spiritual formation to obey their

⁴⁹⁶ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 297 / *Tales*, 497.

⁴⁹⁷ Q 27:18. See al-Tha^clabī, *al-Kashf*, volume 7, 198.

⁴⁹⁸ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 297 / *Tales*, 498.

⁴⁹⁹ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 297 / *Tales*, 498.

leaders and to assist their leaders through their Ṣūfī wisdom. Al-Tha°labī seems to be uncompromising in his belief that rulers should be honoured and supported.

During al-Tha°labī's time, the political power of the caliph in Baghdād was nominal and Baghdād as a centre of power for the entire Muslim world was reduced to a symbolic existence. Because of this historic reality in the tenth and eleventh century Khurāsān, the Ghaznavids and even their predecessors, the Sāmānids, were politically independent from the powerless caliph in Baghdād. The rulers of the Sāmānids were known as *shāh* (king in Persian) while those of Ghaznavids were addressed as *sulṭāns*. However, al-Tha°labī seems to have a political view on supporting the legitimate authority for the sake of political unity needed in the Muslim world of his time, through the ant's reply to Solomon's question if he is perceived as a just ruler. He seems to advise all Muslims in his Khurāsān, thanks to Ṣūfī wisdom against the worldly lure, to be mindful of the legitimate authority still inherent in the caliphate system of rulership - the caliphate during al-Tha°labī's time was not yet abolished but lost its political influence.

Al-Tha°labī's knowledge of the growing influence of Ṣūfism heightened his awareness of the importance of harmony between jurisprudence and mysticism in and around Nīshāpūr. The ants in al-Tha°labī's narrative of Solomon therefore suggest a Ṣūfī lesson in spirituality and the importance of simplicity of life. Overall, al-Tha°labī's political justice seems to include a favourable view of growth of Ṣūfism in the broader Islamic community.

3.8.3 Al-Tha‘labī’s Queen Bilqīs

The story of Bilqīs and Solomon offers a different perspective on justice and good leadership. For one thing, the queen challenges the prophet with questions he cannot answer without seeking counsel.⁵⁰⁰ Al-Tha‘labī’s account of Bilqīs is more dramatic than al-Ṭabarī’s; he gives more background information about her accession to the throne after she marries a tyrant king and subsequently deposes him,⁵⁰¹ gaining the support of the people as their new monarch.⁵⁰² However, the story of Bilqīs remains a story within the larger narrative of Solomon and his prophetic leadership. Al-Tha‘labī’s narrative is richer in detail than the account offered by al-Ṭabarī.⁵⁰³ For example, Bilqīs⁵⁰⁴ is inquisitive about the king who is also a prophet. Her perspective on kingship is not as positive as her view of prophethood. She would rather follow a prophet than another king.⁵⁰⁵ Bilqīs’ attraction to Solomon is centred more on his religious identity than on the splendour of his royal image. She is, herself, a ruling monarch, so when Solomon returns the gifts⁵⁰⁶ sent in tribute to his country she is impressed that worldly gifts from another monarchy do not affect

⁵⁰⁰ The demons assist Solomon with the question of the sweet water between heaven and earth; and the angel Gabriel counsels the prophet to sit back on the chair of his throne when he prostrates in confusion because he cannot answer Bilqīs’ question about the existence of God. See al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 320 / *Tales*, 535.

⁵⁰¹ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 313 / *Tales*, 523.

⁵⁰² There is a process of Islamisation suggested here because it is her people who give allegiance-*bāya‘a*- to her, based on her ability to get rid of an oppressive king in Yemen whom she previously has married. Al-Tha‘labī chooses the term *bāya‘a* which reflects an early Sunnī method of choosing a leader. Bilqīs was not a religious figure to her people before she embraced Islam, however, her piety to the Sun was emulated by her subjects. See al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf*, volume 7, 205.

⁵⁰³ There are variations from al-Ṭabarī’s account; for example al-Ṭabarī does not mention that Solomon’s travel into the desert was towards Yemen. Al-Tha‘labī, in his *al-Kashf* and *‘Arā’is*, states that Solomon was heading to Yemen and even made it to the city of San‘ā’. However, his hoopoe reached there first. See al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf*, volume 7, 199; see *idem*, *‘Arā’is*, 311 / *Tales*, 520.

⁵⁰⁴ Bilqīs’ kingdom is a great military power. Al-Tha‘labī exaggerates regarding the significance of a prophet compared to a king. See al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf*, volume 7, 200.

⁵⁰⁵ The Queen of Sheba sends gifts to Solomon to test if he is only interested in power and aggression like a typical worldly king, or whether he will reject these gifts, proving that he is indeed a prophet whose religion she will embrace. See al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 316 / *Tales*, 527.

⁵⁰⁶ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 318, *Tales*, 530.

him.⁵⁰⁷ Even the enticement of having her throne placed before him does not encourage him to abandon the responsibilities he has as a prophet. Impressed by his moral integrity and devotion to his religion, Bilqīs embraces Islam.

Al-Thaʿlabī's Solomon in the story with Bilqīs does not assume Ṣūfī characteristics explicitly except in his determined detachment from the gifts of Queen Bilqīs; nothing is mentioned about the importance of the “heart” in leadership education nor is he challenged about his attitude towards peoples of various social ranks in his dominion. This should not be surprising because Bilqīs is a monarch, extremely rich and influential in her dominion in Yemen, initially non-Muslim in faith but eager to learn about Islam. As a worshipper of the Sun she is a pagan and believes in what she sees (she believes in the Sun because she sees its light.)⁵⁰⁸ In many ways, she appears Solomon's match, for she is wise and powerful. To embrace Islam she needs to see how the faith takes shape in Solomon. In comparison, Solomon appears limited in his ability to answer her questions because al-Thaʿlabī's Solomon is not a scholastic theologian (*mutakallim*); he does not even start a debate with the queen. Instead he seeks counsel from his court advisors such as the demons who are under his control.

In the narrative about the story of Bilqīs, Solomon has the upper hand over other authorities: Queen Bilqīs who initiates a visit to him after he returns her gifts; the hoopoe bird who follows Solomon's commands, such as searching for water in the desert, and discovering new dominions for him to convert to Islam; the demons,

⁵⁰⁷ This response emulates the example of the Prophet Muḥammad who refused to accept gifts from non-Muslims. See Watt, “The Queen of Sheba”, 97.

⁵⁰⁸ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 314 & 315 / *Tales*, 525 & 526.

who obey Solomon's commands and offer him advice. His control seems quite prevalent over everyone.

In the Khurāsānī context of the eleventh century, al-Tha[°]labī urges the acceptance of Ṣūfism. This is represented in the narrative by the ants which represent the many Ṣūfī *khānaqās* spread throughout the countryside of Khurāsān, with their ascetic intent to purify the hearts of Muslims for Islam. Further, the submission of Bilqīs to the prophetic Solomon rather than the kingly Solomon illustrates how earthly dominions are meant to be under the rule of Islamic justice, extending al-Ṭabarī's notion of the universal power of Islam to include the Ṣūfī contribution.

3.9 Just leadership: concluding remarks

Of the three prophets discussed above, Joseph seems to represent the ideal leader. David's moral failure and Solomon's extreme power over his subjects are not considered to be the qualities of a great leader. Joseph, given the trials he has had to endure, has grown in moral integrity and wisdom and with a sense of empathy and responsibility toward his subjects. All three prophets grow to become significant rulers. All marry women whose first husbands have died; however, we have seen that the views on political leadership and the authority of leaders from the centre and from the edge differ subtly.

The centre views the authority of a ruler in terms of the prophet's special abilities or his righteousness; Joseph is an interpreter of dreams, David is a warrior and a psalmist with a singing voice of power and beauty, and Solomon has the supernatural ability to converse with all creatures. All, except David, seek counsel and wisdom from their advisors in governing their kingdoms: Joseph consults with

Jacob and the king of Egypt and Solomon with his demons and *jinn*. David seems to be the sole ruler who consults with no one, yet he is the only one in the narratives who converses directly with God. Though both David and Solomon are kings, the centre shows little interest in highlighting the monarchical aspects of their governance. Political justice from the centre is free from association with royalty. Al-Ṭabarī prefers to view his three prophets as prophet-rulers capable of ensuring a unified Muslim empire.

In contrast, the view from the edge is at ease with prophet-kings as rulers. Even Joseph is a crowned king, because he is trusted by the Egyptians and is a just and selfless ruler who ensures that his subjects make it through the famine. Al-Tha[°]labī's Joseph shares qualities with the Twelver Shī[°]īs' idea of an *imām* whose expertise in religious matters helps explain the unknown to others and earns him the trust of the other king of Egypt and all Egyptians. The edge also considers the emotional and psychological side of each prophet's personality and its possible threat to their moral integrity as prophet-kings—the attempted seduction of Joseph, David's infatuation with Bathsheba, and Bilqīs' challenge to Solomon. But the centre of authority for each ruler does not depend on appearances, rather on the interior attitude of purity. Al-Tha[°]labī's view of political authority includes religious qualifications but warns against piety of self-blame (in David's case) which is excessive and contributes nothing to liberate the sinner/penitent ruler to regain the purity of heart. Instead al-Tha[°]labī seems to be accepting a moderate form of Ṣūfī's training of the heart (Cf., Solomon). Al-Tha[°]labī promotes these interior qualities of a leader than just exterior appearances. He seems to indicate that true leadership emanates from a religious formation; this parallels the high expectation of the

Twelver-Shī'īs from their *imām* whose expertise on religion can affect success of a political leadership (Cf., Joseph). There are high expectations from the political rulers to draw pragmatic wisdom from their Muslim faith.

One issue from al-Tha'labī remains unclear which is David's fear standing before God in the Last Judgment. This stems from the martyred Uriah who does not extend his forgiveness to David's acquisition of Bathsheba. One can speculate that this unforgiving attitude is a warning to rulers never to abuse their subjects or their roles as leaders.

Chapter Four

4.0 Friendship

4.1 Friendship: the *adab* of modesty, loyalty, trust and good counsel

In this chapter, I will present an analysis of friendship and good counsel from two perspectives, al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* (the centre) and al-Tha'labī's *ʿArāʾis* (the edge), by examining their narrative accounts of the lives of the prophets Joseph, David and Solomon.⁵⁰⁹ In Chapter Three, I noted that the accounts of the prophets by al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī were written between the works of Ibn al-Muqaffa' and Kay Kā'ūs. The *Mirrors* of Ibn al-Muqaffa' and Kay Kā'ūs have things to say about friendship, and will help us approach the narratives on friendship by al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī.

Ibn al-Muqaffa' advises during the second ʿAbbāsīd Caliph al-Manṣūr on how good friends and wise counsel ensure good governance; later Kay Kā'ūs offered similar advice to his son when Kay Kā'ūs was still in power. In the second part of *al-Adab al-kabīr*, Ibn al-Muqaffa' advises rulers that they should cultivate friendships,

⁵⁰⁹ There are a few references in the Qurʾān about friendship at two levels: the vertical friendship which is between two unequal beings – God and believers – and the horizontal one among humans. The vertical friendship is actualized in terms of an alliance (covenant, loyalty and protection) which forms a religious solidarity of messengers, prophets and believers, all of whom are in friendship with God, “Whoso makes God his friend, and His messenger, and the believers – the party (*hizb*) of God, they are the victors.” (Q 5:56). In the friendship with God there are associated benefits of guidance, “God is the Protector of believers; He brings them forth from the shadows into the light”, and protection from fear, “Surely God’s friends – no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.” Such benefits are derived from God’s sure friendship, “they have, apart from God, no protector and no intercessor; haply they will be God fearing.” (Q 2:257). The horizontal aspect of friendship in the Qurʾān takes communal solidarity as a moral agency to pursue righteousness and to avoid evil acts as decreed, “Believers, men and women, are friends one of the other; they bid to honour, and forbid dishonour; they perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and they obey God and His messenger.” (Q9:71). Even a friend is a person who is trusted to fight for the interest of all believers. See Louise Marlow, “Friends and friendships”, in the *EQ*, volume 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 273. However, the Qurʾān cautions against friendships with unbelievers, “O believers do not take the unbelievers as friends instead of believers.” (Q 3:118). One has to keep in mind that the Qurʾānic sense of friendship among believers had to do with the inception of a new society on religious ground which entails obedience to God and His Messenger. Without this obedience, the horizontal friendship could scarcely exist with solidarity.

for it is vital for good leaders to have good and loyal friends.⁵¹⁰ In the fourth section of his *al-Adab al-kabīr*, which is directed to the general audience, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c addresses the qualities to be looked for in friends and how to maintain good friendships.⁵¹¹

According to Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *adab* concerns social etiquette and particularly social manners, an important element of friendship. He says that proper *adab* requires humility —that for the sake of proper friendship one should not flaunt one's knowledge or look down on others' thought to be less powerful or less knowledgeable:

Among friends, do not claim knowledge just for yourself, for by doing this, you stand between two poles of disgrace; they may strip your claim and dispute your arrogance and prejudice; or they may not dispute you and your claim will appear artificial and weak.... Be utterly ashamed to inform your friend that you are a scholar and he is ignorant, even if you are frank..... But knowledge will embellish and guide you, while to avoid boasting about it [knowledge] will not cause jealousy against you.⁵¹²

The author also cautions against quarrelling, because one never knows his interlocutor's level of knowledge. Friendship thrives in a milieu of humility as opposed to pride in superiority of knowledge. Ibn al-Muqaffa^c probably was reacting to the court secretaries of his time who were constantly competing in knowledge and language skills to draw attention and procure favour from their caliph. Ibn al-Muqaffa^c writes about the ideal, which seems to have differed greatly from his reality at the caliph's court. In an ideal court the governing ruler is encouraged to listen to his court advisers, who in turn can foster friendship with him through proper social etiquette. For Ibn al-Muqaffa^c *adab* opens a venue for friendship, and *ʿilm* has

⁵¹⁰ Michael Cooperson, "Ibn al-Muqaffa^c", *Arabic Literary Culture, 500-925* (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 158.

⁵¹¹ Cooperson, "Ibn al-Muqaffa^c", 158.

⁵¹² Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 88.

to be cautiously and diplomatically revealed to allow friendships to develop in court. This caution reflects a prevailing fear in trusting court friendships, and the need for more amiable relations between the caliph and his court advisors.⁵¹³ He also implies that personal conversations should not be allowed to escalate into disputes for the sake of winning an argument.

Ibn al-Muqaffa^c also speaks of friendship as characterized by dignity or honour (*murūʿat* in Arabic). The Arabic word *al-marʿ* means “man” or generally “human being,” with the full integrity of existence that it engenders. Accordingly, *murūʿat* is a manly virtue to be unconditionally preserved lest one fall into social shame. This quality of friendship must display fraternal loyalty or, as Ibn al-Muqaffa^c puts it:

Stay loyal to whomever you take as fraternal and with whom you correspond, to incorporate within yourself continued relational harmony with your brother, even when a hateful thing about him is known to you. For a friend is neither like a slave you dispense of nor like a wife you divorce at will, but he is your honour and manly virtue. The ideal of manhood is nothing but in his brothers and companions...if you isolate one stumbled person from your group of brothers, and even if you were sorry to do that, it will be understood as betrayal against brotherhood.⁵¹⁴

There is a strong emphasis in the eighth century of Ibn al-Muqaffa^c's Iraq on *loyalty* expressed in familial brotherhood, as long as *murūʿat* is preserved. As the above quote states, betrayal is unforgivable because it violates the ideal of being human. Among friends, forgiveness is implicit and shows loyalty, except when undermining *murūʿat*. Nobility in friendship entails forgiveness and binding friendships, according to Ibn al-Muqaffa^c who insists that:

⁵¹³ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c has an issue in his *al-Adab al-kabīr* against greed and treachery in the court.

⁵¹⁴ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 90.

Blaming is isolation from love, and excess is from greed, while pleasing forgiveness is amiable in manners in all that you yearn for, provided you stay in honour, love and dignity.⁵¹⁵

Since loyalty is essential to the maintenance of friendship, Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] offers counsel on how to select friends. Some may prove short on loyalty; others may be lowly because of their foolishness. To reject the friendship of a fool is essential.⁵¹⁶ Therefore friends should be selected from among particular social ranks – one's kin or someone of superior status,⁵¹⁷ whose loyalties can be tested. Friends may appear dignified, but they can react with shame or carelessness in certain circumstances. Written at the beginning of the °Abbāsid dynasty, Ibn al-Muqaffa[°]'s advice literature promotes modesty, loyalty and dignity as qualities essential for friendship and good counsel.

On the same subject of friendship and good counsel, Kay Kā'ūs, in his *A Mirror for princes (Qābūs-nāma)*, accepts Ibn al-Muqaffa[°]'s emphasis on *adab* as a channel for friendships, adding that one has to manifest generosity in gift sharing.⁵¹⁸ He distinguishes between the bad company of untrustworthy friends, and the enemy. His reason is rather pragmatic. Bad friends may occasionally give good counsel; the enemy is always known for his hostility and malicious intentions.⁵¹⁹ Therefore his advice in selecting friends is not against having bad friends but against cultivating the friendship of enemies and fools. The enemy will never contribute sound advice, while the fool can do more harm than a clever enemy. One comes to be known by the friends one keeps⁵²⁰ and by the enemies and fools one avoids.

⁵¹⁵ Ibn al-Muqaffa[°], *al-Adab*, 106.

⁵¹⁶ Ibn al-Muqaffa[°], *al-Adab*, 107.

⁵¹⁷ Ibn al-Muqaffa[°], *al-Adab*, 106.

⁵¹⁸ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 128.

⁵¹⁹ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 128-129.

⁵²⁰ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 129.

Kay Kā'ūs offers different advice than Ibn al-Muqaffa^c with respect to testing friendship. Kay Kā'ūs does not take tested loyalty for granted, rather he cautions against sharing secrets with loyal friends lest they use these secrets against him if there is a quarrel or falling out later.⁵²¹ He adds that a friend who has inflicted harm is never to be trusted again.⁵²² The issue of *trust* is the main tension in Kay Kā'ūs' advice with respect to friendship. Friendship, he believes, requires testing during adversity in order to win a level of trust, since in prosperity all are friends.⁵²³ For, example, boon companions (*nudamā'*) are more disposed to the cup than to the friend.⁵²⁴ Loyalty has to be absolute, particularly in adversity, and cannot be freely assumed. It seems therefore that Kay Kā'ūs is more cautious in his evaluation of friendship and especially intimate relations. For Kay Kā'ūs, friendship is authentic only when proven during adversity, and he urges caution in sharing secrets among friends. He is less intimate than Ibn al-Muqaffa^c's description of friendship.

In summary, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c and Kay Kā'ūs agree that the first stage in choosing potential friends is whether or not the person displays good etiquette or social manners; fools do not give good counsel, and good counsel is the fruit of a worthy friendship. They differ on the types of friends to be cultivated, the social ranking of friends, the validity of friendships and the degree to which one shares personal secrets.

Loyalty could be defined as faithfulness to a commitment, while trust is a reliance on the integrity and strength of a person. Given this distinction, it seems that Ibn al-Muqaffa^c highlights commitments manifested in such virtues as absolute

⁵²¹ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 131.

⁵²² Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 131.

⁵²³ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 130.

⁵²⁴ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 129.

obedience to the caliph. For him, obedience is the other side of the coin of loyalty for it is the tested ground or praxis of loyalty. Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] worked in the court of the Caliph al-Manṣūr who was suspicious of those subservient to him. For example, despite the military service of Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī (d. 755/137), the governor of Khurasān, whose military exploits brought the Umayyad dynasty to an end and established its successor, the °Abbāsīd dynasty, the Caliph al-Manṣūr suspected that Abū Muslim's growing influence would compromise his loyalty to the caliph, if not create outright disobedience. Al-Manṣūr commanded that Abū Muslim be killed, thus ending any possibility of betrayal.⁵²⁵ This milieu of suspicion, doubt and mistrust sustained by the caliph to maintain a balance of power could have been instrumental in Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] placing such a high value on loyalty.

Therefore, in the eighth century loyalty was considered an important measure of friendship but it was taken for granted; Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] was very close to the centre of power and questioning loyalty proves to be too risky when one works inside the caliph's court. In the eleventh century, loyalty had to be proven by the measure of reliability (trust) of a subject under the ruler – personal trust under the condition of adversity had become the required standard for friendships. This reflects Kay Kā'ūs's eleventh century in Gurgān which had in the previous century seen the changing of hands between two major forces in Persia between 948/336 and 997/387:⁵²⁶ the Būyids at the centre of Persia and the Sāmānids in the east in Khurāsān. Qābūs eventually took hold of Gurgān in 997/387 and was known for his

⁵²⁵ Kennedy, *When Baghdād*, 18-20.

⁵²⁶ *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 4, 214-15.

swift vindictive mood against army officers for the slightest suspicion.⁵²⁷ Given this fact, *trust* for the Ziyārids was quite a sensitive requirement for a working friendship.

There is a difference⁵²⁸ between loyalty and trust assumed by Ibn al-Muqaffa^c and Kay Kā'ūs, which highlights their different perspectives concerning friendship between the eighth-century and the eleventh-century. For Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *friendship is possible under the condition of undisputed loyalty to the ruler characterized by avoiding quarrels, manifesting personal humility and seeking out one's kin or those of higher social class*. In contrast, by the eleventh century of Kay Kā'ūs's context, friendship is marked by the earning of personal trust which is tested during adversity and which a ruler has to gain by way of diplomacy and kindness (generosity) including towards those of lower social ranks. However, this trust has its limits since friends are not those with whom one shares secrets. With shared secrets, a friend becomes a potential enemy. Yet for both advisors friends were there to provide good advice and share their wisdom. But there is an implicit requirement to have a friendship with the ruler: it is a friendship which recognises the authority of the ruler and this authority defines how to relate to the ruler and offer the benefit of counsel.

These perspectives on friendship in the advice literature raise two primary questions relative to the *qiṣaṣ*: How is loyalty manifested? And, how is trust built in a friendship with a prophet-ruler during adversity? Below is the analysis of the texts from the two views: the centre and the edge.

⁵²⁷ *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 4, 215.

⁵²⁸ It is granted that in good friendships loyalty and trust are simultaneously at play; friendships which lack either or both fail to continue. Although there is a fine line between loyalty and trust, loyalty is manifested by one to others while trust is earned, in time, among friends. In this way, a new friendship can start with loyalty but is maintained with both loyalty and trust.

4.2 JOSEPH

4.2.1 Al-Ṭabarī's Joseph: a view from the centre

The story of Joseph and his loyal friendships are within members of one family, such as Jacob and his son. This is not to deny the on-going immense love between a father and his son which is exclusive and mutually unconditional, but in this relationship two prophets manifest aspects of loyalty and trust which broadens the perspective of friendship to be included in familial relations. While the relationship between Jacob and Joseph can be interpreted in terms of fatherly affection and the love of a son for his father, the way which these two prophets interact holds broader lessons about the nature of loyalty and trust shown to a ruler.

Al-Ṭabarī's account of Joseph offers narrative detail of the relations among other narrative figures — Jacob, his brothers, and the king of Egypt. As the narrative events develop, Joseph's friendships do too. Initially, only Jacob from his family acts as a loving friend to Joseph; his half-brothers are hostile and unfriendly but Joseph's loyalty to them transforms their rebellion to submission to Joseph's dominion. From the outset, it seems, al-Ṭabarī advises the rulers of his time to be aware of hostility from their own kin. However, Joseph's commitment to his prophetic mandate eventually wins him not only the respect of his half-brothers but the complete trust of the king of Egypt. The narrative demonstrates that allegiance to a prophetic calling can eventually gain loyalty, respect and friendship, as well as self-knowledge. Joseph is quite relational and capable to make lasting friendships.

In al-Ṭabarī's narrative, there are two episodes regarding Joseph's friendship with Jacob (his father) - the seduction and the final reconciliation in Egypt — which

bring Joseph and Jacob together in a relationship of love, counsel and affectionate loyalty.

4.2.2 The friendship between Joseph and Jacob: the seduction scene

In this scene, Joseph has been sold into slavery and is owned by Potiphar and his spouse Ra^cil. In this part of the narrative al-Ṭabarī seeks to highlight the moral dimension of chastity.⁵²⁹ Ra^cil finds the beauty of Joseph irresistible and attempts to seduce him while both are locked inside a courthouse. At the time of the attempted seduction, although father and son are far apart and living in two different countries, Jacob appears as an apparition to Joseph inside the room and warns him against committing adultery and submitting to the wishes of Ra^cil— one prophet's warning to another of the possible loss of moral integrity.⁵³⁰ Jacob uses the symbols of freedom and strength to embody this moral integrity: “like a bird in the sky who is not caught,”⁵³¹ and “like a difficult ox upon whom no work can be done.”⁵³² The transformation in Joseph is palpable once he hears the authoritative voice of his father; he flees from Ra^cil.

Al-Ṭabarī equates fornication with the loss of moral integrity; it is something not to be condoned in a prophet. The psychological connection between the two prophets is obvious in his narrative: one can become the conscience of the other. Jacob embodies the moral conscience of Joseph, enabling Joseph to resist moral degradation. In spite of Joseph's slavery, he is to preserve his dignity – *murū'at* – according to the counsel of his fellow prophet. Fornication and adultery violate such

⁵²⁹ This may correspond to al-Ṭabarī's personal life since he remained unmarried.

⁵³⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 204 / *History*, volume 2, 155.

⁵³¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 204 / *History*, volume 2, 155.

⁵³² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 204 / *History*, volume 2, 155.

dignity. Jacob's loyalty to Joseph and the latter's trust in the authority of Jacob's voice serve the dignity of Jacob's prophetic stand. At this moment in the narrative, Joseph remains a slave by purchase but is privileged by prophetic protection. It is Jacob's friendship with Joseph which delivers him from the moral dilemma orchestrated by Ra'îl. To emphasize his point, Al-Ṭabarî contrasts the entrapment of Joseph in the well by his two half-brothers with the efficacy of Jacob's prophetic warning to Joseph. The influence and counsel of a prophet is strengthened by al-Ṭabarî's narrative of the friendship between Jacob and Joseph and how this friendship averts a crisis. In the situations of crisis, Joseph is always favoured either with a revelation (inside the well) or good counsel (at the seduction scene).

4.2.3 Jacob and Joseph: in Egypt

Jacob's arrival in Egypt is the final episode in the narrative of Joseph, for it brings about a face-to-face encounter between the two prophets. Jacob's first words upon recognizing Joseph as a pharaoh of Egypt are "Peace be upon you. O one who removes sorrows."⁵³³ This marks the end of a long episode of grief at their separation and reveals the strength of their friendship; their mutual presence to one another brings great joy to both of them. Their encounter initiates a new stage of their friendship, which is grounded in joy, and actualizes Joseph's dream in which all members of his family bow down to him. When Joseph says to Jacob: "This is the interpretation of my dream of old. My Lord has made it true,"(Q 12:100) the narrative fulfils the foretold dream. It is noteworthy that al-Ṭabarî inserts the Qur'ānic *āya* to indicate how prophecy and revelation are in harmony with history.

⁵³³ In Arabic, the "remover of sorrows" is "madhhab al-aḥzān". See Al-Ṭabarî, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 217 / *History*, volume 2, 182.

“The Lord has made it true” links the dream with reality, and the events in the life of Joseph help to understand the dream. It represents history as successive events which bring meaning to the dream. Al-Ṭabarī’s perspective of world history far exceeds recorded facts but entails interpretation of revelation (in this case the dream of Joseph). It is here that Joseph brings meaning to the long suffering their friendship has had to endure: the actualization of the dream and a fulfilment of the prophecy. Their friendship includes the shared suffering of separation between two peers or fellow prophets. Joseph’s word comforts Jacob, showing him that his grief at Joseph’s absence for those many years has not been in vain but is an integral part of the fulfilment of the prophetic dream. The authenticity of friendship is at the centre of this part of al-Ṭabarī’s narrative. A friendship which is strong enough to weather the grief of a long separation, it is capable to contain a great joy of reconciliation. The separation between Joseph and Jacob parallels Kay Kā’ūs’ idea of adversity which is the testing ground for trusted friendship. It seems that al-Ṭabarī advises rulers who live a life of hardship and separation away from their friends and family that they can draw strength from the lives of the ancient prophets whose lives were marked by similar trials. A ruler, he suggests, is not that much different from a prophet, for the fidelity of friendship is vital to his good leadership.

4.2.4 Joseph and the King: al-Ṭabarī’s view from the centre

Joseph’s interpretation of the king’s dream creates friendship between them. The friendship begins when Joseph advises the king to prepare for an impending famine:

And when Joseph was brought, and when he had talked with him, he said, 'As of today you are established and trusted.' And Joseph said, 'Set me over the storehouses of the land.'⁵³⁴

Eventually as trust grows between them Joseph's social position improves, because the king grants him the highest political office: "The king set Joseph in authority over Egypt."⁵³⁵ The king realizes that Joseph's interpretation of his dream has implications for the entire land of Egypt; Joseph, through his counsel, gains the king's respect and trust. Trust features strongly in the narrative as if interpreting dreams and managing resources are related credentials. The king without hesitation offers Joseph the management of the country's natural resources to help Egyptians face the famine.

During the famine Joseph is addressed as king by his adversaries (his half-brothers) because his influence in Egypt is strong. For instance, Benjamin, after he bows to Joseph says, "O king! Ask this cup of yours about my brother. Where is he?"⁵³⁶ But later in the narrative, also according to al-Suddī, "when they arrived in Egypt, Joseph spoke to the king who was above him, and he and the king went forth to meet them",⁵³⁷ suggesting that Joseph is not the official king. Upon seeing Joseph, Jacob says to Judah, "'This is the Pharaoh of Egypt!' But Judah said, 'No this is your son Joseph.'"⁵³⁸

Al-Ṭabarī seems subtle and particular about the kingship language in his narrative. Joseph is usually addressed as king only by his adversaries, not by his friends. Al-Ṭabarī gives no detail about any coronation of Joseph, despite his

⁵³⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 209 / *History*, volume 2, 165. This is according to the trusted sources of Ibn Ishāq and al-Suddī.

⁵³⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 209 / *History*, volume 2, 166. This is transmitted by Ibn Ishāq and al-Suddī. Both are highly trusted sources in the tradition.

⁵³⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 214 / *History*, volume 2, 175.

⁵³⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 217 / *History*, volume 2, 182.

⁵³⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 217 / *History*, volume 2, 182.

impressive leadership of Egypt. He only appears as a Pharaoh when his ageing father, Jacob, approaches Egypt, perhaps an indication that Joseph has reached the highest social standing possible in Egypt, with authority to govern the entire country. However, the friendship between Joseph and the king has not been legitimised by a coronation ceremony, despite the trust which the king of Egypt has in Joseph and the loyalty which Joseph has shown for Egypt. The crown is a symbol of absolute worldly power over the land and its people and is usually earned through political and military victories.⁵³⁹ Al-Ṭabarī therefore does not suggest that a courtly advisor like Joseph will automatically rise to the station of king in return for his friendship; only Joseph's adversaries refer to his authority as royal authority.

During the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty, there was only one ruler, the Caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (d.842) who wore once the crown.⁵⁴⁰ None of the caliphs who followed were crowned; this suggests that at the time of al-Ṭabarī in late ninth-early tenth century in Baghdād, accession to political power did not culminate in an official crowning ceremony. However, during the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty, starting with Caliph al-Muʿtaṣim, commanders who won major military battles for the caliph⁵⁴¹ were conferred with a ceremonial honour, “a crowning ceremony,” for their military achievements. This suggests a sense of friendly approval by the caliph towards one of his loyal subjects, though not necessarily an assurance of a life-long friendship. Al-Ṭabarī must have known the superficiality of such ceremonies, for he would not confer a similar honour on the prophets in his narrative. Besides, Joseph is not the

⁵³⁹ Al-Azmeh, *Muslim kingship*, 12.

⁵⁴⁰ Al-Azmeh, *Muslim kingship*, 68.

⁵⁴¹ Dominique Sourdel, “Questions de cérémonial ʿAbbāsīde”, in *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 28 (1960): 143-4.

commander of an army conquering new territories for his king; his victory entails seeing the country through a famine and securing justice for all of Egypt.

Joseph, in al-Ṭabarī's mind, is an earthly ruler. The double function of his prophetic leadership and earthly rule lacks only royal status. The narrative seems to suggest that Joseph's success in Egypt equates him to an ideal ruler without a king. The narrative focuses on his life as a prophet whose ability to interpret dreams wins him the trust and friendship of a king. He sows the seeds of his wisdom and advice to reap the fruit of their friendship.

Why does al-Ṭabarī not convey kingship to Joseph, given that the caliphs of his time in Baghdād had the dual function of earthly and religious rulership? For faithful Muslims of al-Ṭabarī's time in Baghdād, the king "malik" may sound more of a pagan ruler than a Muslim. The negative attitude of traditionalists against monarchies was common at that time; al-Ṭabarī through his Joseph narrative seeks to advise caliphs that they were inheritors of the wisdom of prophets, not kings. This social critique is implicit in al-Ṭabarī's narrative. Many of the caliphs of his time concentrated their efforts in self-aggrandisement through the construction of elaborate palaces and the conquering of new territories to expand their tax base and support their expensive lifestyles. Al-Ṭabarī suggests that the lifestyle model for rulers should be derived not from kingship but from prophecy. The caliphs could secure loyalty and trust from their friends by prophetic examples as opposed to royal privileges.

4.3 Joseph: al-Thaʿlabī's view from the edge

4.3.1 Joseph and Jacob: seduction episode

Al-Thaʿlabī in his narrative takes into account al-Ṭabarī's unforgiving assessment of adultery and fornication as grave sins. There is no moral dispute between the two views. There is however a narrative difference in the description of the seduction scene and the presence of Jacob at the intense moment of seduction. Al-Thaʿlabī uses the same source as in al-Ṭabarī — al-Suddī — but unlike al-Ṭabarī's account⁵⁴² al-Thaʿlabī adds another source from Qatādah who transmits Jacob's words, "Will you do the deed of fools when you are inscribed in the register of the prophets?"⁵⁴³ He also adds to the moral gravity of adultery the prophetic expectation that friends should not imitate fools (already present in the advice literature). He connects adultery and fornication to foolishness, both of which should be avoided by prophets: "Joseph, are you doing what fools do, you whom God destined to be one of the prophets?"⁵⁴⁴ The flaw of foolishness underlies the immorality of the seduction/fornication.

Another source⁵⁴⁵ relates the image of a hand which appears and pokes at the chest of Joseph, warning him of the Last Day when he will stand accountable for his acts, a narrative scene which inhibits the lustful emotion of Joseph and causes him to flee the scene. In this scene, Joseph seems to perceive Jacob's poking Joseph's chest as part of the warning against adultery. This is an essential addition in al-Thaʿlabī's narrative, for the warning has a physical element to it and not just an image of Jacob

⁵⁴² He also appears biting his fingers, as a sign of warning against shame of fornication. See al-Ṭabarī, *History*, volume 2, 156.

⁵⁴³ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 119 / *Tales*, 199.

⁵⁴⁴ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 120 / *Tales*, 200.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibn ʿAbbās (d.687). See al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 119 / *Tales*, 199.

(as in al-Ṭabarī). In the view from the edge, al-Thaʿlabī favours a stronger physical presence of Jacob to prevent Joseph from sinning with Raʿīl.

Friendship between Jacob and Joseph in the view from the edge also puts the prophetic identity of Joseph at the centre of concern. In his narrative al-Thaʿlabī seems to suggest that no prophet or ruler should risk his moral integrity by engaging in foolish acts, as moral integrity is essential not just to all friendships but to personal trustworthiness.

4.3.2 Jacob and Joseph in Egypt

Al-Thaʿlabī's account of the final encounter between Jacob and Joseph is theological at two levels: the significance in the Islamic faith of friendship with respect to the end of time, and the theological understanding of the Resurrection as rejoining what is lost in earthly existence. These two levels seem to link friendship to an eschatological reality. When Jacob learns that Joseph is alive and that he is the King of Egypt, the royal image of Joseph is not as important to Jacob as whether Joseph has kept his Islamic faith. Once it is confirmed that Joseph remains a Muslim, Jacob replies "Now God's grace is complete."⁵⁴⁶

The dialogue between Jacob and Joseph upon meeting for the first time in Egypt has theological weight. According to al-Thawrī, Joseph addresses the long grief of his father by saying: "My father you wept for me until you lost your eyesight. Did you not know that the Resurrection would rejoin us?"⁵⁴⁷ In reply, Jacob says, "Indeed, my son, but I feared you might have been stripped of your religion and

⁵⁴⁶ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 139 / *Tales*, 230.

⁵⁴⁷ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 139 / *Tales*, 230.

we would be separated on the Day of the Resurrection.”⁵⁴⁸ These are two leaders in dialogue about friendship in the context of faith. It plays an important part in the grief they shared regarding their long separation. Jacob’s grief is part of his friendship with Joseph; Joseph’s faith carries his friendship with Jacob to eternity. This is strikingly different from al-Ṭabarī’s view from the centre which indicates that friendship has its purpose in finding joy here on earth; the view from the edge extends friendship to eternity. Al-Thaʿlabī offers the solace of faith (trust in the Resurrection Day) as a remedy for the separation anxiety between friends. Hence, true grief is when the separation of friends extends to eternity.

Al-Thaʿlabī’s view from the edge, far from the centre of the empire, seems to advise that the practice of faith can be a source of strength for friendships in lieu of political power. It suggests that true friendships are only for believers because for al-Thaʿlabī, political power is temporal; friendships based on temporal power are limited. For Jacob it is more important that Joseph keep his Muslim faith, rather than be a king; it indicates that al-Thaʿlabī is reacting to politics in his own country of Khurāsān, which was far from stable. Al-Thaʿlabī believes that the exercise of faith is needed to give stability to the region. At that time the Karrāmiyya and the Ḥanafīyya, two religious movements that were also politically ambitious, sought political recognition and status. This meddling with politics must have registered in the mind of al-Thaʿlabī, particularly as friendship did not exist between the Karrāmites and the Ḥanafites, and he could see the consequences of hostilities defined through political ambition.

⁵⁴⁸ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 139 / *Tales*, 230.

In contrast, the Malāmatiyya and Ṣūfism were politically quietist but capable of attracting converts to Islam who had little social power and political connection. Al-Thaʿlabī therefore seems to suggest that one should seek an alternative goal to political power and that the moral integrity of friendship should be preserved through the loyalty inspired by faith. He believes that the rewards of friendships which lead to the joy of paradise far outweigh the rewards of political friendships, which concern themselves with temporal privileges and status.

4.3.3 Joseph and the King

There is a natural progression to a worthy friendship in the relationship between Joseph and the king in al-Thaʿlabī's narrative. Initially the king wants Joseph to serve him only. Joseph replies that all he needs is God's protection.⁵⁴⁹ Al-Thaʿlabī draws a sharp contrast between the king and God in the righteous words of Joseph – only God matters and is worthy of a prophet's service.

Despite Joseph's pious response to the king, a relationship develops between them, which grows as they share knowledge of their backgrounds (by way of mutual introductions). Joseph speaks of himself as a son of Jacob the Israelite, and invokes a prayer in Hebrew.⁵⁵⁰ Joseph's obvious language skills convince the king that the reading of the dream is correct. As trust builds up between them, Joseph is elevated from the status of a prisoner to Treasurer of Egypt. As a *ḥāfiẓ*⁵⁵¹ he is considered a worthy custodian. The king's trust is evident when, in reply to Joseph's voluntary offer to manage Egypt's resources, he says: "Who could be more deserving of this

⁵⁴⁹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 126 / *Tales*, 209.

⁵⁵⁰ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 126 / *Tales*, 209.

⁵⁵¹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 127 / *Tales*, 211.

task than you?”⁵⁵² Later in the narrative, Joseph even interprets the king’s hunger as the beginning of the famine Joseph had predicted.⁵⁵³

The king even allows Joseph to be crowned and grants him a signet ring.⁵⁵⁴ In the coronation scene, at the end of the narrative, the king is humbled at the presence of Joseph, “whose face becomes radiant beauty like a full moon.”⁵⁵⁵ This narrative detail about Joseph’s transfiguration (*farr* in Persian) to a presence of utmost beauty is missing in al-Ṭabarī’s narrative. Joseph’s beauty produces awe and devotion (not lust) in his presence, even from kings. In short, Joseph is more than a king, he is a chosen prophet.

The situation of having two concurrent kings indicates a passing of one kingship to another, from one ruler-king to a prophet-king capable of interpreting the hidden signs within personal dreams. However, al-Tha^clabī seems to suggest harmony between Islam and the monarchy, but not as equal entities, as exemplified by Joseph’s conviction that only God provides the necessary protection.⁵⁵⁶

4.4 DAVID

4.4.1 Al-Ṭabarī’s narrative of David and friendship

The paradox of David’s personality is well expressed in the narrative. On the one hand, he is a prophet with a righteous heart, merciful to animals and expected by the Prophet Samuel to be at least as merciful to his fellow humans. Chosen from among his brothers, whose physical appearances are more impressive, David is

⁵⁵² Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 127 / *Tales*, 211.

⁵⁵³ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 128 / *Tales*, 212. Even at the edge of the empire, it seems, what affects the ruler affects the country.

⁵⁵⁴ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 127-28 / *Tales*, 211.

⁵⁵⁵ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 128 / *Tales*, 211.

⁵⁵⁶ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 126 / *Tales*, 209.

endowed with extraordinary gifts— the psalms, a remarkable singing voice, a strong kingdom, courage to face the enemy (Goliath for example), and pious devotion. His personal talents suggest a just leader, a prophet of integrity and a religious model for his subjects. His relation with creation – birds, beasts— grows as he sings the psalms in the wilderness. On the other hand, David initially remains unchallenged in his prophetic life; he becomes inspired by what he reads about his prophetic ancestry— Abraham, Isaac and Jacob⁵⁵⁷—and is resolved to attain equal stature with those early prophets. However he knows that he must earn this stature through similar personal trials. Hence he approaches God and asks to be tested as a prophet should. God agrees and instructs him to be on guard and to wait. On his devotion day of prayer he is unaware that the golden bird which appears in his chamber is sent by God to test him. Its allure distracts him from prayer and brings him to a window where he notices a naked woman bathing, whom he immediately desires. She is the only wife of Uriah, while David has ninety-nine wives. Yet he becomes obsessed by her, covets her, seduces her and arranges for her husband to be killed so he can claim her as his one hundredth wife. Through his lack of judgement, manipulation of the law for his purposes, and moral lapse, he fails the trial God has set him.

4.4.2 David and God as friends: a view from the centre

The question that arises here is: Who are David's friends? As a ruler, David does not surround himself with advisors or cultivate close friendships with other

⁵⁵⁷ There is also a biblical preference, in the Gospel of Matthew, for the same three prophets when Jesus says, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." See Matthew 8:11 in the *Holy Bible*, 8. However, the Gospel of Matthew refers to these figures as recognized by non-Jews ready to worship the God of Israel. See *Sacra Pagina*, volume 1, The Gospel of Matthew, edited by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J (Collegville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 114. In al-Ṭabarī's account, the reference to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob corresponds to the significance of these figures among early Muslims as well.

rulers or with those whom he can trust and receive loyalty. In the narrative of al-Ṭabarī, David rarely strikes an intimate conversation with anyone, except God and his litigants, or assumes the responsibility of caring for anyone in need. He displays no such intimacy with people of different social ranks. His dealing with Uriah is one such example of David's failure to treat his servant soldier with at least some loyalty. During his adolescence, even his own father is ashamed to present him, among his other sons, to the prophet Samuel, because of his odd physical smallness.⁵⁵⁸ The narrative says nothing about his other relationships. He is the youngest son of Jesse who overlooks his potential and sends him to tend sheep in the countryside. From the beginning, David seems to be a loner and that maybe the reason for not easily receiving advice from others. As an adult, even his ninety-nine wives do not seem to fill the gap of his loneliness. In effect these wives are not life-partners of David, but he gives them attention on days set aside exclusively for them. In this way, David appears more regimented in relating to his household members than cultivate lasting friendships with some of them. His religious devotion is also characterized by his loneliness — his worship to God is a private affair. There is no indication that he publicly leads prayers for other devotees in the faith. His loneliness feeds his desire for the bathing woman, with dire consequences, as noted above. Even after he acquires her as a spouse, his relationship with her is not based on friendship. There is no shared wisdom or good counsel between them.

There is, however, in the story of David one friendship which dominates the narrative. It is his friendship with God, since both David and God are narrative figures and in dialogue. This friendship is characterized by God's endowment of

⁵⁵⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 282 / *History*, volume 3, 141.

special talents to David, who is to use them to serve others and praise God. Having secured his special place and admiration among the Israelites, David desires a special place in his friendship with God, a place equitable to the special relations his prophetic ancestors have had with God. To achieve this, his loyalty and trust must be tested by God. Al-Ṭabarī considers David's friendship with God essential to the growth of David's self-knowledge. Klar sees David's attitude as pride⁵⁵⁹, but she does not question the necessity of trials in the life of a prophet. Is trial the only measure of a prophet? Al-Ṭabarī portrays God as approving of trials. What is a trial? How does it define the quality of friendship between God and his prophet? God answers David's request:

Your forefathers were tried with misfortunes with which you have not been tried. Abraham was tested with the sacrifice of his son, Isaac with the loss of his sight, and Jacob with grief over his son Joseph.⁵⁶⁰

A trial is an experience of misfortune which may challenge a prophet's strength of faith or cause him to forget his religious identity. None of David's forefathers faltered in their trials. David's trial is not as severe as the lifetime of agony for Jacob or the despair expressed in Isaac's loss of sight, but it has a life-long effect. David's trial tests his religious devotion to God and his own moral integrity.

As mentioned earlier, God accedes to David's request for a trial of his loyalty and faithfulness, but *counsels* David to be on guard and patient. In effect, God in the narrative appears to be the only vizier to David and to his leadership. Yet David does not take his vizier's advice seriously enough during his episode watching a bathing woman. As he fails the test, his friendship with God takes on a new reality. God

⁵⁵⁹ Marianna Klar, *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī's*, 102. One of the reasons for David's trial is his claim that he is confident that he can live through a day without succumbing to a temptation.

⁵⁶⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 283 / *History*, volume 3, 144.

somehow keeps honouring his friendship to David when God sends him two litigants to reveal his transgression. When David laments and repents, God forgives him as a sure sign of diplomacy to carry on his leadership.

The difficulty for David is to carry on after he fails to observe God's advice for him. David is no longer the same confident leader but wastes his days, even after his forty day lamentation is over, in perpetual guilt and fear over the Judgment Day. This fact alone indicates the importance of a friendship between a prophet and his God. God's forgiveness is crucial and it represents God's sustained loyalty to his prophet. But the trust between David and God is affected to a degree that David cannot be the same type of a leader. In fact, he is no longer entrusted to be the prophet with a privilege to build the temple. This privilege is taken away from him:

This is a holy house, and you have stained your hands with blood. You are not to be its builder, then, but a son of yours, whom I shall make king⁵⁶¹ after you, whom I shall name Solomon, [and] whom I shall keep safe from bloodshed.⁵⁶²

The issue of fear becomes dominant force in David's life; this is a major shift in his personality given that earlier he has faced Goliath with courage and determination. At this stage of the narrative after his transgression, David is fearful of facing himself and of God in the Last Judgment, despite that God has forgiven him. The effect of this fear on David is palpable and has undermined his ability to govern as a ruler even though he remains a prophet. Besides, his lamentation gives

⁵⁶¹ The Arabic word used for "I shall make him king" is *amlikahu* from the root m-l-k, a reference to a king. Al-Ṭabarī does not deny the kingship of Solomon son of David but he does not over-emphasise the status of kingship in terms of coronation and royal appearances of a prophet-leader; perhaps al-Ṭabarī finds *mulk* more a pagan entity which he keeps at a distance. See al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 286. However, al-Ṭabarī does not label Joseph as a king; this could be explained that al-Ṭabarī is faithful to the Qur'ānic revelation which mentions Solomon and his kingdom (Q 2: 101) but the Qur'ānic Joseph is never mentioned as a king, but as *al-ʿazīz* (the mighty one) in Q12:78.

⁵⁶² This is according to Wāḥb b. Munabbih (d. 725/106) whose knowledge of the Israelites and their scriptures are well trusted. See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 286 / *History*, volume 3, 151.

no indications that David has changed to a loyal and trust-worthy friend among his people. Rather, his remaining days were marked with living fear of losing his entry to paradise.⁵⁶³ This suggests how important for rulers to take good counsel, otherwise the repercussion may last to the Last Judgment when all relations are accounted for.⁵⁶⁴

But there is a psycho-political related issue with David's transgression and for which God's forgiveness does not seem to make David recover and resume his leadership. David does not seem to accept God's forgiveness because he thinks that God's favour remains impartial.⁵⁶⁵ This is more a psychological issue than a religious one but it has dire effects for David's leadership. The guilt and fear that he feels are crippling his confidence to resume leading his people. David seems unable to receive from his only friend, God, the remedy of forgiveness. Consequently his people can no longer trust David as their leader who he once was. There is a consistency of David's psychological state: he neither receives God's advice nor embraces God's forgiveness for his leadership. His loyalty to God remains in question despite his

⁵⁶³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 285 / *History*, volume 3, 149.

⁵⁶⁴ This is a theological issue and its meaning was debated between the Mu'tazilīs, Ash'arīs and the Māturīdīs. Al-Ṭabarī does not make an issue of the Last Judgment but seems to take the traditional stand that God's forgiveness and mercy will suffice to deal with the grave sin that even a prophet has committed, and that the friendship between God and His prophet shall endure. Al-Ṭabarī does not embrace the Mu'tazilī idea of *al-Wa'd wa'l wa'id* (The promise and threat) which is a controversial principle in Islamic thought. The Mu'tazilīs argued that believers still have to face damnation for the sins they kept. What God has promised and threatened in the Qur'ān will be carried out on the Day of Judgment –divine justice means that God keeps his promises of hell and paradise. Therefore the Mu'tazilīs believe that a sinner can avoid hell under these conditions: repentance, intercession of the Prophet, and God's ultimate forgiveness (given to the repentant). However, this line of thought did not gain wide acceptance among all Muslims. A more moderate theological view emerged through the Ash'arites and the Māturīdīs that no believer is expected to abide in eternal punishment; a repentant sinner may suffer a temporal punishment but God eventually grants paradise. See Uri Rudolph "al-Wa'd wa'l wa'id" in *ET*, volume 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 6. Likewise in L. Gardet's "Ḥisāb", *ET*, volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 465, it offers nuances on the fate of a sinner. For example, the Ash'arīs thought that belief in God outweighed all sins, while the Ḥanafīs and Māturīdīs claimed that believers who have sinned will receive temporal punishment.

⁵⁶⁵ Al-Ṭabarī refers to a Medinan *faqīh*, Anas b. Mālik (d. 712/93) and takes a moderate stand between God's impartial favour and His mercy. See Joseph Schacht, "Anas b. Mālik", *ET*, volume 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 262.

intense lamentation. The consequence is a suffering leadership because David never cultivates strong friendships. From the perspective of God, God's trust in David's friendship is not fully restored. The punishment may not be eternal damnation, which is David's major fear given that he is a prophet; but the loss of God's trust prevents him the honour of constructing God's temple, which is certainly a form of temporal punishment that God's trust in David remains in question.

4.4.3 Contextual consideration of al-Ṭabarī's David

Since the return of the caliphate to the city of Baghdad in 892/278, al-Ṭabarī lived through three different caliphs, namely al-Mu^ʿtadid (d.902/289), al-Muktafī (d. 908/295) and al-Muqtadir (d.932/320). The first two were quite capable caliphs and managed to stand up against the threats that Baghdad felt from the different rebellious movements like the Qarmatians in southern Iraq and the Ṭūlūnids in Egypt;⁵⁶⁶ besides the activities of the Byzantines were causing much concern after they have captured Armenian cities which were held by Muslim Arabs. The readers, during the tenth century, could have associated David's decline of his leadership to the decline of the ʿAbbāsīd leadership under the caliph al-Muqtadir whose leadership was ineffective; he was much influenced by his own mother, Shagīb (also known as Sayyida) and the infamous vizier of Ibn al-Furāt (d.924/311) whose lifestyle was far from humble.⁵⁶⁷ But without Ibn al-Furāt and his influences, al-Muqtadir would have been nothing as a ruling caliph. Part of the reason was that al-Muqtadir assumed power at a very young age of thirteen, an age which is hard to psychologically carry

⁵⁶⁶ H. Kennedy, "al-Mu^ʿtadid bi-Allāh, Abū'l ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Ṭalḥa", in *EF*², volume 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 759. See K.V. Zetterstéen and C.E. Bosworth, "Al-Muktafī bi Allāh, Abū Muḥammad ʿAlī b. Aḥmad" in *EF*², volume 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 542.

⁵⁶⁷ K.V. Zetterstéen and C.E. Bosworth, "al-Muqtadir bi-Allāh, Abū'ī Faḍl Dja^ʿfar", 541.

on a state leadership. However, al-Muqtadir lived a life of extravagance during the longest reign of a caliph in the ʿAbbāsid dynasty. All the troubles he had about his viziers were about the financial crisis of the state treasury. Such a lifestyle was morally deficient to seek the state-welfare as David's lustful attitude to the bathing woman proved to be detrimental to his leadership. A moral deficient leadership has no future. Eventually, there was a rebellion in Baghdād in 929/317 against al-Muqtadir's lifestyle and consequently he was deposed. Al-Ṭabarī's David likewise was no longer fully accepted by his people as their trusted leader, despite his lamentation before God.

4.5 The account of David in the 'Arāʾis

Al-Thaʿlabī's David is a very resourceful narrative figure. When David sings the psalms in Hebrew, there is a healing effect on those who listen: "He would recite the Psalms with seventy melodies so that those with fever would sweat and the unconscious would revive."⁵⁶⁸ David has been endowed by God with superlative singing ability and a talent of enormous attraction and effect, coupled with strength of devotion and wisdom (*ḥikma*).⁵⁶⁹ He is known for sound judgement,⁵⁷⁰ for courage in the face of the enemy,⁵⁷¹ and for celestial knowledge (the bell metaphor, not found in al-Ṭabarī) which allow him to differentiate a truth from a lie.⁵⁷² Although in principle there are no major contradictions between al-Thaʿlabī's and al-Ṭabarī's David, the former narrative emphasises David's wisdom as a governing ruler. His

⁵⁶⁸ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 275 / *Tales*, 463.

⁵⁶⁹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 276 / *Tales*, 465.

⁵⁷⁰ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 278 / *Tales*, 467.

⁵⁷¹ Even Prophet Luqmān attests to David's readiness to fight and to weave his iron garment. Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 279 / *Tales*, 468.

⁵⁷² Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 277 / *Tales*, 465.

praise to God is part of all creation's praise to the Almighty (Gabriel even shows David a hidden worm whose gurgling could be heard by God).⁵⁷³ This suggests that no praise from any created being, including that of a prophet, is unheard by God.

Al-Tha[°]labī provides three reasons for God's trial of David. The first two are also mentioned in al-Ṭabarī's narrative — the desire for equality with his ancestors⁵⁷⁴ and his belief that he is beyond temptation even for a full day.⁵⁷⁵ Al-Tha[°]labī's third reason is David's promise of loyalty to the Israelites.⁵⁷⁶ The author deliberately places David within his Jewish context to illustrate that he could not keep his promise to a people he is supposed to lead. There is a difference noted here between being endowed with wisdom and keeping a pledge of loyalty. Wisdom alone is not sufficient to ensure a loyal and trusted friendship. Trust is a crucial element because it casts light on David's character and his ability to lead his people. Therefore, for al-Tha[°]labī, David's failure reveals a flaw in his character that questions his ability to keep his promise of justice to the Israelites. The view from the edge gives a double-edged meaning to David's failure, first as a prophet who gives in to temptation⁵⁷⁷ and second, a leader who could not keep his promise of loyalty. The failure is also the result of David's overconfidence that he can weather similar trials to those of his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Al-Tha[°]labī reveals the truth of this prophet's weakness, for it takes but a glance from Bathsheba to debase David's loyalty to God.

⁵⁷³ Al-Tha[°]labī, *Tales*, 464.

⁵⁷⁴ The referred sources are al-Suddī (d.744/126), al-Kalbī (d. 821/205) and Muqātil (d.767/150). See Al-Tha[°]labī, *‘Arāʾis*, 279 / *Tales*, 468.

⁵⁷⁵ This is according to al-Ḥasan who quotes from Shuʿayb b. Muḥammad. See al-Tha[°]labī, *‘Arāʾis*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

⁵⁷⁶ Al-Tha[°]labī, *‘Arāʾis*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

⁵⁷⁷ God grants David one moment of trial (al-Tha[°]labī) as opposed to one day (al-Ṭabarī's account). The Tha[°]labī's Arabic text, however, does not say one moment, but one hour but Brinner erroneously translates it as one moment. Al-Tha[°]labī, *‘Arāʾis*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

4.5.1 Friendship of God with David: a view from the edge

Despite the omnipotence of God, there are features in the friendship between David and God that reflect horizontal elements common to other earthly relations. As mentioned earlier in the Introduction, this thesis is not a study in theology but rather an analysis of the literary and cultural significance of the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*. In this perspective, even God is a narrative figure with characteristics similar to humans. God communicates with His prophets, warns and advises them, and has personal expectations towards them; God considers these prophets worthy of His attention and endows them with special gifts and talents, tests their loyalty and integrity, and punishes them for their failures. In turn, a prophet can befriend God, can provoke a reaction from Him, can negotiate with Him, can seek His approval, and, like David, can fail Him, can lament his failure and can seek forgiveness. Had it not been for David's pride and his ambition to equate himself to the greatness of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God's trial would not have occurred. Negotiation indicates the horizontal aspect in their friendship, for it triggers the trial and continues with David's lamentation after failing the test. All these details support the idea that the relationship between David and God has aspects of an inter-personal friendship despite the metaphysical differences between them.

There are two sides to the friendship between David and God: the time before David requests a trial and the amendment of the friendship following David's failure. Al-Thaʿlabī's narrative also tells of God's acceptance of David's request to be tested as a prophet and advises him to be patient and watchful.⁵⁷⁸ According to al-Thaʿlabī,

⁵⁷⁸ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 279 / *Tales*, 469.

David's complex personality is the result of two factors; his immediate success as a warrior and the intensity of his devotion to God. Both contribute to his over-confidence in himself: "He had convinced himself that he could endure the passing of a day without yielding to sin."⁵⁷⁹

The Nīshāpūran compiler presents David as a prophet who has more self-pride than self-knowledge. As God chides David, "I admire your devotion, but pride consumes acts of devotion. If you admire yourself a second time, I will entrust you with your own affairs."⁵⁸⁰ This sentence suggests that pride and immodesty are not elements found in genuine friendship. Perhaps the reason for David's loneliness is his pride, as he feels he is without equal because of his piety and military success. He even wants to be quite independent from God, to prove his righteousness and to win ultimate approval as a prophet-king. One could go so far as to say that David's ambition is to run his affairs independently of God, as he asks Him to "entrust me with my soul for one year."⁵⁸¹ God agrees to trust him only for a moment/hour.⁵⁸² The negotiation between God and David prepares the reader for David's coming failure. God also offers David implicit advice that despite his military success he lacks the wisdom to know his limitations. No one can claim immunity from unforeseen temptation, prophets included. Paradoxically, this moment happens during his worship (the same occurs in al-Ṭabarī's version), a time dedicated to trusting one's self to the mercy of God. Yet the worm of temptation takes David in a different direction. David centres his thoughts on Bathsheba on the day of his devotion to God, allowing his desire for her to overwhelm him. The actions that

⁵⁷⁹ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

⁵⁸⁰ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

⁵⁸¹ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

⁵⁸² Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 280 / *Tales*, 470.

follow—his desire to possess her despite her marriage to Uriah, and his ensuing intrigues—bring him to a grievous act of injustice against Uriah. In sum, al-Tha^clabī links the justice of rulers to entrusting the self to God and to resisting the temptation of vainglorious absolutism.

The lamentation prayer, not found in al-Ṭabarī, expresses intense regret and reveals how David sees his failure and his relationship with God. It also shows an error in David’s own judgement, for he feels abandoned by God when in fact he was the one who pleaded with God to be entrusted to his own affairs. “Put me at my ease,” he begs God, “for You have abandoned me, though my sin has stayed with me.”⁵⁸³ David cries out to God, saying that he was not warned like the others,⁵⁸⁴ and that he cannot bear the heat of the sun, so how can he bear hellfire for all eternity.⁵⁸⁵ There is an aspect to his lamentation which suggests that David is still negotiating with God, still trying to escape the impending punishment. David remains a negotiator in al-Tha^clabī’s narrative. Yet he knows he has erred against God: “You commanded me to be like a merciful father to orphans and to be to the widows as a compassionate husband, but I forgot your covenant.”⁵⁸⁶ That he failed to do justice to his role as a prophet is prominent in his lament. He viscerally feels the severity of his fall: “my sin is closer to me than my skin”.⁵⁸⁷ He loses the ability to praise in song: “The birds praise you while I, the weak, erring servant, do not follow your

⁵⁸³ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 474.

⁵⁸⁴ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 474.

⁵⁸⁵ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 474.

⁵⁸⁶ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 474.

⁵⁸⁷ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 475.

charge.”⁵⁸⁸ David is restless in God’s presence: “I am he who is unable to stand the noise of Your threat.”⁵⁸⁹

At this point David manifests a change of attitude towards his prophetic ancestors. He no longer aspires to be ranked among them. He now asks God “in the name of my father Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob ... grant me my request.”⁵⁹⁰ It is noteworthy that al-Tha[°]labī includes Ishmael in the list of prophets to whom David looks up as exemplars in this instance. Why does al-Tha[°]labī include Ismā[°]īl in David’s lamentation, when Ismā[°]īl is excluded from David’s list of prophets in his initial request to be tested? What is al-Tha[°]labī saying to the reader here?

The figure of Ismā[°]īl, the son of Hagar, a servant girl, is significant in the Muslim story of Abraham’s sacrifice. It is common belief among Muslims that Ishmael and not Ishāq was the one whom Abraham was about to sacrifice.⁵⁹¹ Al-Tha[°]labī, in the story of Moses and the slain [°]Āmīl, lists Ishmael along with Isaac and Jacob (Abraham is not mentioned) in an oath to prove the innocence of the Israelites of shedding the blood of an innocent person.⁵⁹² However, except in David’s lamentation, there is no other place in the *‘Arā’is* where Ishmael is mentioned in an invocation to God.

There are two common characteristics between David and Ishmael. Ishmael is fond of hunting, archery, horsemanship and wrestling.⁵⁹³ These are manly qualities which help him to face any danger or difficulties. David shares these qualities, as is

⁵⁸⁸ Al-Tha[°]labī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 475.

⁵⁸⁹ Al-Tha[°]labī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 475.

⁵⁹⁰ Al-Tha[°]labī, *‘Arā’is*, 283 / *Tales*, 475.

⁵⁹¹ Cf. Al-Tha[°]labī, *Tales*, 158: “the *Dhabīḥ* was Ishmael”.

⁵⁹² Al-Tha[°]labī, *‘Arā’is*, 234 / *Tales*, 388.

⁵⁹³ Al-Tha[°]labī, *‘Arā’is*, 83 / *Tales*, 141.

evident from his fight with Goliath. The second quality is that both are supposed to build temples in their own time. Ishmael helps build with his father (Abraham) the temple (i.e., the Ka'ba) in Mecca.⁵⁹⁴ In comparison, David, because of the sin he committed against Uriah, is prevented from finishing the construction of the temple in Jerusalem. Al-Tha'labī seems to pitch Ishmael against David deliberately and in order to point out the problematic nature of the prophethood of David. By comparison with the purity and saintliness of Ishmael, David's transgressions become all the more evident. Al-Tha'labī's high regard for the Sufi-inspired qualities of "purity of intention and heart" leads him to set apart some prophets from others.

There is a deeper sense of this purity of Ishmael because as a prophet he shows an extreme degree of submission to God, even at the point of death, when Abraham is about to sacrifice him. Ismā'īl acquiesces to God;⁵⁹⁵ he exemplifies complete submission to God – in essence, he is a perfect Muslim. While Ismā'īl entrusts his life to God, David negotiates with God to be entrusted with his own life, if just for one moment. This contrast between Ishmael and David indicates that in al-Tha'labī's view from the edge, tremendous importance is placed on the religiosity of political leaders.

Al-Tha'labī's inclusion of Ishmael also serves the narrative structure of the David story well. David may think he is worthy of the rank of Abraham, yet al-Tha'labī suggests a comparison with Ishmael in his stead. Abraham is titled *al-khalīl* in Arabic religious literature, "God's intimate companion". David, however, cannot aspire to such a high rank, in al-Tha'labī's view. It is more fitting that Abraham's

⁵⁹⁴ Al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is*, 88 / *Tales*, 149.

⁵⁹⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 14.

son Ishmael (whose self-sacrifice is well known in Islamic tradition) be listed next to his name rather than David whose relationship with God is based, as noted above, on negotiation. Al-Thaʿlabī implicitly indicates that friendship with God is not expressed through negotiation but only in loyal surrender.

The concept of God in David’s lamentation is worth investigating, since such concepts shape one’s perspective of friendship. In an earlier dialogue with God, David does not address Him with names that exhort Him. However, in his lamentation he addresses God as “creator of light” repeatedly, and also as “powerful king”, and as “my God”.⁵⁹⁶ Such references clearly bring out David’s true status as a sinner in need of God’s mercy. But each time God is so magnanimously addressed, David manifests his own fear of God’s judgement, since his sin is so personal. Forgiveness and God’s judgement are two contested issues in David’s penance.

Despite God’s forgiveness of David – as He is made to say in al-Thaʿlabī’s account, “the first who will drink from the chalice on the Day of Resurrection will be David”⁵⁹⁷ – the tension between God and David is not fully resolved in al-Thaʿlabī’s narrative. On the one hand, the rift between God and David is portrayed as less acute than in al-Ṭabarī. On the other hand, David’s status in al-Thaʿlabī’s account seems altogether more precarious, and the damage done to David’s prophethood irreversible in David’s psyche.

Al-Thaʿlabī relates on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih that “when God forgave David, he wept for his sin for thirty years.”⁵⁹⁸ The author compares the voice of David lamenting in the desert to the sound of reed pipes – a very Nīshāpūran

⁵⁹⁶ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 283 / *Tales*, 474-75.

⁵⁹⁷ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 284 / *Tales*, 477.

⁵⁹⁸ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 285 / *Tales*, 477.

image.⁵⁹⁹ As al-Tha^clabī takes care to note, even monks⁶⁰⁰ are in solidarity with David's lament; the monks in al-Tha^clabī's story seem important witnesses to David's lamentation. In the context of al-Tha^clabī's time, such a role would have been played by the Ṣūfīs, who were beginning to organize themselves in *khānaqā's* under the leadership of Ṣūfī masters.

However, the big issue remains the innocent blood of Uriah and the prospect that David will be held accountable for it on the Day of Resurrection. The silence of Uriah when David admits to him that he has acquired Bathsheba as a spouse brings out David's concern about the Day of Reckoning. Despite God's forgiveness, there is no guarantee that Uriah will forgive him. David exclaims, "My Lord! How can it be that you forgive me while my companion does not?" God replies: "David, whether he does or not, I will give him on the Day of Resurrection that which his eyes have not seen."⁶⁰¹

Regardless of what happens on the Day of Resurrection, as in al-Ṭabarī, what really suffers in the end is David's kingdom. He can no longer function as a confident ruler. His friendship with God is no longer the same. David can no longer sing with the birds and enjoy life as he has known it before getting involved with Bathsheba and Uriah. All aspects of his life, spiritual, political, social and psychological become completely absorbed in the lamentation over his misdeed. Al-Tha^clabī's David is a double-sided figure: on the one hand, he is a strong leader and warrior, winning the leadership over the Israelites; on the other hand, he fails in religious and moral terms by thinking that a prophet-leader can sustain himself

⁵⁹⁹ In Chapter Two I mentioned that Nīshāpūr is near to fields of reeds.

⁶⁰⁰ Al-Tha^clabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 286 / *Tales*, 477.

⁶⁰¹ Al-Tha^clabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 284 / *Tales*, 476.

independently of God even for a moment. The long lamentation suggests that al-Tha^ʿlabī views any claims of rulers to act independently from God as a very serious offence indeed, and as leading kingdoms into ruin.

4.5.2 Contextual consideration of al-Tha^ʿlabī's David

Readers in the eleventh century of al-Tha^ʿlabī's David may understand David's difficulty of receiving advice to that of their Sulṭān, Maḥmūd of Ghazna. In fact, there were similar characteristics in his leadership which can be found in David's narrative personality. Both Maḥmūd and David were warriors, conquerors of new territories and they had the genius for military strategy. Maḥmūd was attentive like David to the sacred law and tried to live by its precepts; however, when it came to receiving good counsel, Maḥmūd and David were quite similar but for different reasons. David could not receive good counsel from his God because of his pride and belief that he could entrust all his affairs to himself without dependency on God. Maḥmūd, however, had a different situation; his council which comprised of his vizier and military commander were overly afraid to speak honestly what was in their mind⁶⁰² to their Sulṭān lest he would get angry and inflict upon them severe punishment. Besides they were no guarantee that he would ever listen to a good advice which he did not like to hear. This suggests that Maḥmūd, being strictly an autocrat, did not create a friendly milieu to receive honest counsel from others possible. In this way, Maḥmūd had to take his affairs to himself and remain an autocrat in all aspects of his government. In matters of politics and military decisions, Maḥmūd was not necessarily known for his humility to consider valid

⁶⁰² Nāẓim, *The life and times*, 128-29.

opinions of others close to him in his post as the head of the state. Besides he was not bound to accept all the advice of his council because he was the Sulṭān. He was a one man show in the affairs of the state.

4.6 SOLOMON

4.6.1 Al-Ṭabarī's Solomon: a view from the centre

According to the narrative of al-Ṭabarī, Solomon is a nomad king with the supernatural ability to command the wind, order the *jinn* and subjugate the demons to his will. In al-Ṭabarī's account, Solomon's kingdom covers regions such as the Tigris, Syria, Iṣṭakhr (in Persia), Yemen,⁶⁰³ and Sidon, an island with a dethroned king.⁶⁰⁴ His throne with its entourage of advisors —birds, *jinn*, demons and humans — moves by the power of the wind, commanded as Solomon sees fit. Such mobility of the throne seems to be quite swift, for, as al-Ṭabarī puts it: "When it [the throne] had been lifted, he commanded the light breeze, which carried them [the distance of] one month in one morning, to wherever he wished."⁶⁰⁵ Despite this high authority, Solomon remains a prophet in complete surrender to God and fearful of his Creator. The message of God remains dear to his heart and as a king he wants to conquer new regions for Islam. His friends on his mission are primarily the demons and the hoopoe (chief bird).

⁶⁰³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 292 / *History*, volume 3, 164.

⁶⁰⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 293 / *History*, volume 3, 166.

⁶⁰⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 287 / *History*, volume 3, 153. Cf. Q 34:12.

4.6.2 Friendship with demons and the hoopoe

Solomon consults humans, *jinn*, birds and demons (*shayāṭīn*), in this hierarchical order. Demons are the last to be consulted. In al-Ṭabarī, the demons advise Solomon on matters about which humans and *jinn* would have no knowledge. Al-Ṭabarī's narrative seems to separate demons (*shayāṭīn*) from *jinn*. His demons are not proud or rebellious,⁶⁰⁶ but highly intelligent and they serve Solomon well. He seems to trust them and never doubts their advice. They even build a castle for Bilqīs under Solomon's command.⁶⁰⁷ For instance, when Solomon wants to know the nearest water reservoir before he moves further into the desert, the demons are the first to advise the king to consult the hoopoe: "O Messenger of God! Do not be angry, because if there is anything to be known, the hoopoe knows it."⁶⁰⁸ Later when Bilqīs sends a gem to be pierced, it is the demons who inform Solomon that a termite could do the job.⁶⁰⁹ They also give Solomon the correct answer about the sweet water to be found in the sweat of horses.⁶¹⁰ In general, demons know many things and accordingly they advise the king.

On the other hand, when Solomon orders the demons to build a castle for Bilqīs, their obedience does not outweigh their own desire to safeguard their own

⁶⁰⁶ Like the angel Iblīs. See Q 2:34. Before Islam, the *jinn* were considered as evil and hostile nymphs in the desert. See D.B. Macdonald, "Djinn", *ET*², volume 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 546. Evil demons in the Islamic tradition were tempters who lured humans away from the path of God. See A. Rippin, "Shayṭān", in *ET*², volume 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 406. On the other hand, not all demons were considered evil; some were good and inseparable companions to humans, as evidenced in Q 50:21. It seems that al-Ṭabarī refers to demons as wise consultants to Solomon, though not necessarily as loving companions. They see themselves as slaves of Solomon and waiting to be free. See Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 291 / *History*, volume 3, 162.

⁶⁰⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 291 / *History*, volume 3, 162.

⁶⁰⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 289 / *History*, volume 3, 157.

⁶⁰⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 160.

⁶¹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 291 / *History*, volume 3, 161. Sweet water is *mā' rawā'* which means drinkable.

interests.⁶¹¹ Given that he already owned one thousand castles for his three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines,⁶¹² the decision to build one for Bilqīs suggests either a marriage proposal or another potential concubine. It is less likely that Solomon would take Bilqīs as a concubine because of her royal status as a ruler. The situation also warrants that Solomon may have already regarded Bilqīs as being similar to other women he already possesses; they reflect his greatness as a leader who has subjugated other monarchies to Islam. In either case, it is the demons who feel subjugated and any marriage between Solomon and Bilqīs will prolong their enslavement should there be any offspring from the marriage.⁶¹³ These demons on this occasion do not support Solomon, but they are still ready to give him good advice on other matters.⁶¹⁴ Therefore the friendship between the demons and Solomon is an unusual one: they are trusted for their wisdom but they are not loyal in their intentions because of their lack of freedom.

The narrative mentions another characteristic of demons; they always communicate collectively with Solomon. They seem to speak as a group and there is no one demon that speaks on their behalf or addresses their needs to the king. Their friendship to the king is one of self-interest. They obey and serve because of the fear he instils in them collectively. They are enslaved and their friendship with the prophet is entirely for the benefit of giving good advice to the ruler.

The hoopoe is the servant-bird to the king but he is less fearful of Solomon. Solomon wishes him to explore the desert for hidden water. When he fails to appear

⁶¹¹ There is a reason behind their hesitancy – they want to be free from his service when Solomon dies but if he marries Bilqīs, his kingdom continues through their offspring and demons remain in bondage. See Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 291 / *History*, volume 3, 162.

⁶¹² Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 288 / *History*, volume 3, 154.

⁶¹³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 291 / *History*, volume 3, 162.

⁶¹⁴ This parallels Kay Kāʾūs' advice that bad company could give good counsel. The demons in the *qiṣaṣ* fit this categorisation in the *Mirrors* genre.

at Solomon's command, his absence angers Solomon who intends to fatally punish him when he does appear.⁶¹⁵ The hoopoe, though warned of Solomon's intended punishment, still appears before Solomon, seemingly without fear of punishment.⁶¹⁶ He knows how to search for new territories waiting for Islam, not just for water, and knows that he brings Solomon news that will appease the king. The hoopoe, flying faster than the throne of Solomon, has discovered the kingdom of Bilqīs.⁶¹⁷ He speaks with the hoopoe of Queen Bilqīs about Solomon who is a still unknown prophet in the kingdom of Sheba.⁶¹⁸ Part of his service is to bring news of the prophet to other kingdoms. When the hoopoe shares his information with Solomon about the kingdom in Sheba he saves himself from fatal punishment. Though the hoopoe's free-spirited attitude runs contrary to Solomon's expectation of immediate obedience, the bird has served him well. His loyalty surprises the king who tests him further by sending him back to Bilqīs with a "noble letter" (*kitāb karīm*).⁶¹⁹ In contrast to the demons, the hoopoe risks his life to deliver the prophetic message of Solomon, proving that he is loyal, even if his loyalty runs contrary to the king's expectation of immediate obedience.

How can al-Ṭabarī's account of the hoopoe and the demons be used as a parable to educate and advise the rulers of his time about their treatment and employment of court advisors? There are two issues at play here. The first concerns the expectations of rulers about their advisors, especially when it comes to the

⁶¹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 157.

⁶¹⁶ Solomon's intended punishment includes plucking out the hoopoe's feathers to expose his bare body to the hot desert sun without any defense, even from the insects. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 157-58.

⁶¹⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 158.

⁶¹⁸ Bilqīs and her kingdom worship the sun. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 158.

⁶¹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 159.

political affairs of the empire. Solomon in all his majesty expects absolute obedience and immediate availability from his advisors, as would the leaders of al-Ṭabarī's time. This seems to indicate the absolute centrality of the ruler. The incident of the hoopoe's temporary absence from Solomon parallels the ruler's immediate obedience from his subject, lest he suspects and mistrusts his advisors. Of what use are trust and loyalty if the ruler expects the immediate accessibility of his court advisors? How then are they able to work outside the court for the wellbeing of the empire and to spread the message of Islam? Al-Ṭabarī uses the example of the hoopoe to challenge the ruler's absolute control. A ruler should not excessively pre-occupy himself with wielding total power in court at the expense of spreading the message of Islam.

Al-Ṭabarī knew something about the intricate relationships of court life even though he did not reside at court. A caliph has a religious duty to his subjects, not just the wielding of political power. Al-Ṭabarī gives concern about the military and political side of two caliphs of his time in his *al-Taʾrīkh*, mainly that of al-Muʿtaḍid (d.902/289) and al-Muktafi (d.908/295); there is no mention of their religiosity. This would indicate just how unimportant religious accountability was, but how important political power had become, at least until the Būyids invaded Baghdād in 945/333. Even with the Būyids it hardly changed.

Caliph al-Muʿtaḍid demanded absolute obedience from his subjects. Al-Ṭabarī recalls in his *al-Taʾrīkh* that this caliph once sent a black eunuch to deliver a message to a member of a noble family who lived on the eastern side of Baghdād. On the way the eunuch was harassed by the mob and beaten; he returned to the Thurayyā Palace and reported to al-Muʿtaḍid what had happened. He sent another eunuch back with him plus some armed soldiers, with the instruction that if there were any further

harassment the offenders were to be caught and punished. Again, the first eunuch was harassed by the mob and this time the culprits were arrested by the army and flogged severely in the police station in Baghdād.⁶²⁰ Obedience to the caliph's command went unquestioned by the eunuch, despite the prospect that again he would be harassed by the mob. In the Caliph's court, as in Solomon's court, certain trusted advisors were quite influential. Likewise, Caliph al-Muktafi had a close vizier al-Qāsim b. °Ubayd Allāh (d. 904/291) who was quite influential to get rid of the enemies of his reign (like the Qarmatians in Syria); he was even instrumental to dispense with the military commander-in-chief, Badr⁶²¹, by a crafty scheme which involved the *qāḍī* of Baghdād, Abū °Umar, and eventually the Caliph had to stop sending army men to Badr.⁶²² Al-Qāsim seems to be a trusted political friend and his word of advice had its weight on the management of the empire.

Al-Ṭabarī's account of Solomon's advisors, demons and the hoopoe reflects the actual situations related above. The hoopoe, like the Caliph al-Muktafi's vizier, seems to be the more influential advisor; the demons, though they may possess the correct information, sometimes have their advice disregarded. The hoopoe may represent those travellers who seek knowledge *riḥlat fī ṭalab al-°ilm*, a symbol relevant for al-Ṭabarī, given his youth was spent in travel for knowledge. At the same time, the hoopoe could be someone in the court who is cunning and knows how to handle the temperament of the caliph by winning his trust.

The relationship between Solomon and his demons may parallel the tension between slaves (Zanj) and the army soldiers who forced the slaves to live in

⁶²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *History*, volume 38, 45-46.

⁶²¹ K.V. Zetterstéen and C.E. Bosworth "Al-Muktafi billāh, Abū Muḥammad °Alī b. Aḥmad", in *ET*², volume 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 542.

⁶²² Al-Ṭabarī, *History*, volume 38, 110.

submission to the caliph's austere rule. Though the slave-rebellion might have caused a threat to the unity of the empire, al-Ṭabarī may be advising the caliphs that a more humane treatment of these slaves could win them as friends who would freely and willingly serve their ruler. The rebellion of the Zanj was one historical indicator that such a change of treatment was necessary.

4.7 Al-Tha'labī's Solomon and friendship: a view from the edge

Al-Tha'labī's narrative of Solomon differs in significant ways from that of al-Ṭabarī. First, he situates Solomon among the four world rulers—Alexander the Great, Nimrod, Nebuchadnezzar and Solomon.⁶²³ Al-Tha'labī always has the bigger picture in his narrative which is full of fantastical detail. In his narrative Solomon's means of mobility is a flying carpet. He sits on the middle of the carpet surrounded by learned people and an outer circle of birds, *jinn* and devils.⁶²⁴ The birds shade his head with their wings during his travels.⁶²⁵ The gathering at the flying carpet resembles a *madrassa* style of learning where students of theology and *fiqh* surround their teacher inside a mosque for learning. Al-Tha'labī portrays Solomon as a teacher surrounded by those whom he instructs and in turn they serve him. It is a religious portrayal of Solomon. Al-Ṭabarī never describes Solomon as a teacher of others, despite his acquired wisdom.

And in this view from the edge, Solomon is also endowed by God to speak with birds and ants.⁶²⁶ Solomon has two extraordinary friends: the ants and the hoopoe. Each challenges Solomon with new knowledge. Unlike al-Ṭabarī's

⁶²³ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 292 / *Tales*, 491.

⁶²⁴ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 294 / *Tales*, 492.

⁶²⁵ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 294 / *Tales*, 492.

⁶²⁶ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 294 / *Tales*, 493. See also Q 27:16.

Solomon, al-Tha^ʿlabī's Solomon consults less with the devils, although he does effectively enslave them more than in al-Ṭabarī, making them weave his flying carpet and build his city of glass.⁶²⁷

Al-Tha^ʿlabī portrays Solomon's monarchy as stable and filled with grandeur through the adornment of his throne, the city and the Temple. His kingdom is stable and dominant and he is considered a just leader who demands strict obedience from his subjects and their readiness to serve at his command, yet he is a prophet who fears God. For his friends, imparting messages of wisdom requires considerable courage.

4.7.1 Solomon's friendship with the ants⁶²⁸

The story of Solomon's friendship with the ants⁶²⁹ is not found in al-Ṭabarī's *History*. However, water does seem to be a recurring theme. In al-Tha^ʿlabī's narrative of Solomon, water features in the story of the ant and later in the narration involving the hoopoe (who sees water hidden beneath the surface of the ground). Both Solomon and the ant pray for water in the desert.⁶³⁰ When the ant crawls onto the prophet's shoulder and he brushes her to the ground, she protests, for she feels that she is being disregarded because of her physical size. She reminds him that she

⁶²⁷ Al-Tha^ʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 305 / *Tales*, 511.

⁶²⁸ The Arabic word for an ant is *namla*.

⁶²⁹ Just before the encounter between Solomon and the ant, al-Tha^ʿlabī adds a short dialogue between the ants about a lark laying its eggs on the path which Solomon will pass; the head ant trusts that in his mercy he will not crush the eggs when he passes by. Al-Tha^ʿlabī's source is Ibn Masʿūd (d. 652/31), an early convert to Islam and a companion to the Prophet. This is a prelude to the ant's encounter (Ṭakhīya) with Solomon, which comes immediately after the lark's story, to remind Solomon that even little creatures are endowed with wisdom. Al-Tha^ʿlabī advises that even prophets endowed with talents still have to acquire self-knowledge and to know their limitations before God. Al-Tha^ʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 296 / *Tales*, 495.

⁶³⁰ Al-Tha^ʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 296 / *Tales*, 495.

is a handmaid⁶³¹ to the same God whom he serves. Her protest reveals a small creature with self-knowledge of her role and relationship with God. She teaches Solomon how to approach the world as a king: to restrain his appetites and laughter (a form of piety), and not to abuse others because of his higher social rank.⁶³² The ant expects a king's service to his people to be instantaneous, generous, respectful of other social ranks and kindly in manners. Solomon fully appreciates and recognizes her insight, and offers in return a kind apology.⁶³³ The importance of social manners, *adab*, is highlighted in this dialogue. The ant's protest also teaches that the ruling class should treat members of the lower class with respect for they can also be endowed with wisdom. Wisdom is not based on class; it transcends the logic of social hierarchy. Hence al-Thaʿlabī offers a social perspective that the social classes in Nishāpūr have to collaborate in friendship, for even the members of the lower social class as new converts in the countryside of Khurāsān may possess spiritual wisdom. The narrative figure of the first ant instructs Solomon about his prophetic leadership, and about letting his heart be the compass for all his actions. This connects to an earlier reference of the heart when the young Solomon answers a question from heaven about the source of human corruption, and to which he replies “It is the heart”.⁶³⁴ Hence the ant reconnects Solomon to his younger days of formation, lest he forget that the true balance between power and friendship comes from an interior harmony of the heart.

⁶³¹ In the Arabic text, the word used is *ama* (pl. *imāʿ*) which translates as bondmaid or slave girl; though the word *khādima* (servant) is not in the original Arabic text, the *ama* suggests a similar meaning. See al-Thaʿlabī's *ʿArāʾis*, 296 / *Tales*, 495.

⁶³² Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 296 / *Tales*, 496.

⁶³³ Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 296 / *Tales*, 495-96.

⁶³⁴ Al-Thaʿlabī, *Tales*, 487. In the Arabic text of *ʿArāʾis*, the Ṣūfī term of *al-qalb* is used in reference to the heart as opposed to the alternative Arabic word of the heart - *al-fūʿād*. See the Arabic text of *ʿArāʾis*, 290.

Later in the narrative, a huge lame ant with wings is presented to Solomon as Ṭākhīya.⁶³⁵ Ṭākhīya commands the little ants to crawl back to their cells, lest Solomon crush them in his visit to their valley.⁶³⁶ Perhaps Ṭākhīya symbolizes a Ṣūfī mentor with responsibility to other ants in their colony of ants. When Solomon asks her if she sees him as an unjust leader, she warns him not to crush hearts which suggests that the mystical side of Islam ought not to be suppressed.⁶³⁷ The importance of the survival of the ants symbolizes the equal importance of the flourishing of the remote imperial territories of Islam, where Ṣūfī wisdom and *adab* are always needed. Once a society loses its centre of wisdom (its heart), it loses its base of authority. If Solomon were to rule his kingdom by subjugating its lower classes then wisdom would be lost and the kingdom would not survive. Wisdom is not limited to political leaders or prophets but is also found in the lower members of the society.

Ṭākhīya questions Solomon's spiritual wisdom and alerts him to the importance of having a tranquil heart; she even strikes an intimate tone with the prophet when she reminds him that his tranquil heart is greater than that of his father. She tells him that although David was capable of bringing harmony and of calming others (perhaps a reference to his psalm singing), Solomon has the heart of wisdom. However, Ṭākhīya places greater value on the tranquillity of the heart as the womb of wisdom than on its curing effect (this is in reference to David's wisdom capable to cure while Solomon's wisdom pacifies people). The power given to Solomon is

⁶³⁵ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 297 / *Tales*, 497. Literally, Ṭākhīyah means 'extreme darkness'. See Louis Ma'lūf, *Al-munjid*, 9th edition (Beirut: al-maṭbaʿat al-kathulikiat of the Jesuit Fathers, 1937), 478. See also *Lisān al-ʿarab*, edited by Ibn Manẓūr, volume 8 (Beirut: Dar al-ihyāʾ al-turāth al-ʿarabī, 1992), 134. Darkness may be a reference to the colour of ants: pitch black or dark brown. Metaphorically, it suggests that weak creatures, though unlikely to appear wise, can surprisingly offer *ḥikma* to enlighten the darkness of world leaders.

⁶³⁶ The valley of ants referred to in the narrative is located in the proximity of al-Ṭaʾif, south of Mecca. See Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 297 / *Tales*, 497.

⁶³⁷ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 297 / *Tales*, 497.

expected to bring harmony within his dominion not to subjugate others to his will. The quality of Solomon's heart, however, is overshadowed by his image of a stern ruler, and the first ant reminds him that even those in lower social ranks, even the tiniest of creatures, need to be shown respect and an attitude of friendliness. The view from the edge does not fully endorse leadership unless a king possesses in equal measures a desire for peace and justice, starting with friendship with all social classes. After all, why is Solomon endowed with the ability to communicate with birds, insects and animals if not to relate to all living things? This idea is carried into the account of Bilqīs, although the heart is not an obvious image there, for al-Thaʿlabī inserts verses of poetry from the Ṣūfī Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 910/297),⁶³⁸ whose image of a ruler is inhuman – no chance for friendship – to describe the attitude of Bilqīs towards kings:

Verily rulers are an affliction wherever they reside; never will you find shade under their wings. Whatever can you hope from folk who, when angered, oppress you, but if you please them, become bored. If you praise them, they think you are deceiving them, and will despise you as they despise all others. So, by God, do without their gates for (finding) kindness, for waiting at their gates is but humiliation.⁶³⁹

It seems that the negative image in the tradition about rulers can be restored somewhat through the ascetic discipline of Ṣūfism which is capable of bringing tranquillity to the ruler's heart. It is the view from the edge that monarchs are unlikely to be friends with their subjects because of their resistance to counsel. In the

⁶³⁸ Al-Junayd was a notable Baghdādī mystic of Persian origin who was rooted in the Islamic tradition of the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth*, and was an expert in *fiqh*. His teaching doctrines included the Unity of God (*Tawḥīd*), mystical sobriety (*Ṣaḥw*), and self annihilation (*Fanāʾ*). His pupils were also quite known like al-Hallāj and Shiblī. However, al-Junayd learned to be politically quietist and even criticized two of his pupils, Ruwam (d. 915/302) and ʿAmr al-Makkī (d. 910/297) when each had accepted the position of a qāḍī in Baghdād. He was not in favour of high publicity for the Ṣūfī members of the School of Baghdād in the late ninth to the early tenth century. See ʿAlī Ḥassan ʿAbdel-Kader, *The Life, personality and writings of al-Junayd* (London: Luzac & Company Ltd, 1962), 1-5 and 48-50. Al-Thaʿlabī must have known the biographical detail about al-Junayd's stand against political posts and has inserted a quote from this mystic into his narrative about Bilqīs.

⁶³⁹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 315 / *Tales*, 527.

narrative, however, the two ants, the smallest of creatures, possess the power of reason and insight, and offer counsel to the king. This narrative offers mystical wisdom representative of the social-political reformation of Nīshāpūran society.

4.7.2 Solomon's friendship with the hoopoe

Unlike al-Ṭabarī, al-Thaʿlabī in his narrative names the hoopoe Yaʿfūr.⁶⁴⁰

The name is possibly a reference to its appearance, dry as if sprayed with dust. It is a name given to a bird whose business is locating water hidden beneath the surface, a bird that flies close to the surface of the ground to sense its presence. In the view from the edge, the personification of a bird and an ant is not an accidental literary device, but rather an attempt at irony—the ant whose name is darkness enlightens Solomon; the hoopoe finds water despite its sand-like and desiccated appearance. Unlike the hoopoe in al-Ṭabarī's narrative, the hoopoe in al-Thaʿlabī's account is of a lower class (the vulture enjoys the highest status among birds).⁶⁴¹ As Yaʿfūr faces the wrath of Solomon, he disarms Solomon's anger when he reminds Solomon that

⁶⁴⁰ The literary meaning of Yaʿfūr is “earth-coloured gazelle”. See Hans Wehr, *A dictionary of modern written Arabic*, edited by J.M. Cowan, 4th edition (Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 730. The root of the name is ʿ-f-r and ʿfar means “sand” (*turāb* in Arabic). However *al-ʿufur* is “distance” (*buʿd*) or infrequent visit (*qilat al-ziyarat*); but the name *yaʿfūr* is the gazelle of the Prophet. So there are several meanings which pertain to the narrative. See *Lisān al-ʿarab*, edited by Ibn Manẓūr, volume 9 (Beirut: Dar al-ihyāʾ al-turath al-ʿarabī, 1992), 282-288. The sand colour of the bird seems to be the most likely interpretation behind the name of Yaʿfūr. It is likely to be a bird covered with dust carried by desert wind, a bird which serves the prophet Solomon and whose function parallels the gazelle of the Prophet Muḥammad. “Yaʿfūr” may also relate to the narrative description of Solomon's intended punishment of his hoopoe by plucking his feathers and letting his body dry on the surface of desert sand under a scourging sun, hence the body gets covered with sand-dust. So the name may suggest either a physical description of a bird, its service or its fate. Likewise, the hoopoe of Bilqīs is named ʿUfayr, a related term to Yaʿfūr which suggests earthy-looking feathers. From a historical point of view, the Yaʿfurids were the first Yemeni dynasty to emerge in Islamic times (847-997/232-387) and whose name was derived from Banū Yuʿfir in Yemen. See “The return of the caliphate to Baghdād: the caliphates of al-Muʿtaḍid, al-Muktafi and al-Muqtadir A.D. 892-915/A.H. 279-302”, in *al-Ṭabarī, History*, volume 38, translated by Franz Rosenthal (New York: SUNY Press, 1985), n.484, 96. This may indicate that al-Thaʿlabī's etymology of the hoopoe is not accidental but signifies a new era in Yemen in his narrative.

⁶⁴¹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 312 / *Tales*, 521.

he is in God's presence (the Almighty); this remark obliges Solomon to reconsider his severe judgement and to recognize a higher authority.⁶⁴² Both the ant and the hoopoe as servants show more boldness in al-Tha'labī than in al-Ṭabarī when conversing with Solomon regardless of social hierarchy and the privilege of power.

The hoopoe's task is to inform the prophet about Bilqīs⁶⁴³ who in al-Tha'labī is presented in a more positive light than in al-Ṭabarī. Though in both accounts Bilqīs is depicted as being a non-Muslim, in al-Tha'labī's account there is an inserted Qur'ānic *āya* , “she is possessed of every virtue,”⁶⁴⁴ which is not included in al-Ṭabarī. She is thus a potential Muslim if not an ideal one, without doubt. The hoopoe remains, despite the threat of Solomon's punishment, a devoted servant to the prophet. He delivers a sealed letter from Solomon to Bilqīs proving his loyalty and saving himself from punishment.

However, Ya'fūr's devotion extends beyond the delivery of the letter. He spies on Bilqīs for Solomon, especially with respect to the gifts she is about to send Solomon.⁶⁴⁵ Solomon therefore knows ahead of time how to belittle the gifts Bilqīs offers. Thus the hoopoe in al-Tha'labī's narrative is both an advisor and an informer. There is a contextual parallelism about spying. Maḥmūd of Ghazna had established a network of spies⁶⁴⁶ among his appointed officials and dignitaries, so that he remained informed about each sector of his political administration. Al-Tha'labī seems to be implicit to describe the political astuteness of his Ghaznavī ruler, Maḥmūd, as a way

⁶⁴² Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 312 / *Tales*, 522.

⁶⁴³ For example, she is half *jinn* (not in al-Ṭabarī) and half human and belongs to a genealogy of governing royalty. Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 313 / *Tales*, 523.

⁶⁴⁴ It is Brinner's translation which includes that Bilqīs possesses every virtue as taken from Q 27:23. Al-Tha'labī, *Tales*, 520. The Arabic text does not say state that she possesses every virtue. See *ʿArāʾis*, 311.

⁶⁴⁵ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 316 / *Tales*, 529.

⁶⁴⁶ Nāẓim, *The life and times*, 127.

of maintaining order and peace; in fact, Solomon's kingdom is rather peaceful because of his totalitarian control over his subjects.

The hoopoe in the view from the edge seems to represent also those who are instrumental in converting others to Islam, especially people from the elite classes. It is not unreasonable to see the hoopoe as one of the travelling Nīshāpūran 'ulamā' who seek to expand the empire and provide information on new regional areas ripe for Islam. Al-Tha'labī is likely to have in mind the Persian scientist and literary figure, al-Bīrūnī (d.1048) who was forced to be in the court of Maḥmūd and has accompanied the Sulṭān in his military expeditions to India. He even wrote *Description of India* from his Indian experience.⁶⁴⁷

Demons are more marginal in al-Tha'labī's account, particularly when it comes to giving advice to Solomon. They are not consulted for example regarding the whereabouts of the hoopoe.⁶⁴⁸ But they are consulted about the piercing of the gem⁶⁴⁹ and the source of sweet water.⁶⁵⁰ In al-Tha'labī's narrative the demons are enslaved labourers. Solomon commands them to build things for him but seeks less their counsel. They weave a silken carpet⁶⁵¹ for him; they build a temple as part of a team of labourers including *jinn* and other humans, each with their own specific tasks, spelled out by Solomon;⁶⁵² they also build an entire city whose columns are to rest on their shoulders;⁶⁵³ the glass castle for Bilqīs is also the result of their

⁶⁴⁷ D.J. Boilot, "Al-Bīrūnī, Abū'l Rayḥān Muḥammad b. Aḥmad," in *ET*², volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 1236.

⁶⁴⁸ Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is, 311 / *Tales*, 520.

⁶⁴⁹ Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is, 317 / *Tales*, 530.

⁶⁵⁰ Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is, 320 / *Tales*, 535.

⁶⁵¹ Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is, 294 / *Tales*, 492.

⁶⁵² Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is, 308 / *Tales*, 516.

⁶⁵³ Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is, 305 / *Tales*, 511.

unwilling labour.⁶⁵⁴ Solomon exercises complete control over the demons and consults less with them. It is to the hoopoe, the informer who he turns for advice.

4.8 Concluding thoughts

This chapter focuses on friendship and counsel from the advice narrative of al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī, in relation to Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and Kay Kāʾūs. Let us review briefly how Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and Kay Kāʾūs address friendship in the court culture of their rulers. Both advocate that good governance requires loyal and/or trustworthy friendships between the ruler and members of his court, like viziers, secretaries, army commanders and other political advisors. An amiable milieu, free from the company of fools and boon companions, is preferred.

Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ insists in his *al-Adab al-kabīr* that the caliph and his advisors must have a quarrel-free relationship and authentic humility among advisors, to put counsel at the service of the common good. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ writes from a court culture where the dynamic of relationships is characterised by loyalty to the political office of the ruler who expects uncompromising obedience from his advisors. It is thus a friendship which is based on the *recognition of authority*. However, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ does not imply that the ruler must be loyal to his subjects, perhaps because the ruler has the right to use oppressive means to avoid anarchy in his empire; in sum, the ruler is not expected to be a friend at all times.

Kay Kāʾūs' understanding of friendship is marked by caution and tested trust as opposed to granted loyalty; trust is tested during adversity. The caution he recommends is operative mainly in the area of secrets which are not to be shared

⁶⁵⁴ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 320 / *Tales*, 534.

among friends for two reasons. First, the enemy is empowered upon knowing the secrets of a ruler. Second, secrets pertain to self-interest and hence they are very personal. Kay Kā'ūs believes that good counsel has to be free from the secrets of one's personal ambition. Courts of local rulers in Kay Kā'ūs's time must have been rife with spies; counsel was therefore to be given and received with caution. As in Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, the ruler is not expected to be a friend.

Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī seem to add to this picture the moral integrity of friendship of prophet-rulers in times of adversity (Joseph, Jacob and David) and in the promotion of the prophetic message (Solomon). In this way, both bring to the fore the moral qualification of a ruler, thus going beyond models such as Kay Kā'ūs's idea of tested trust. Loyalty, trust and good counsel all are aspects of friendship which mark the moral integrity of the ruler. There are other traits which negate friendship, such as personal pride (David's main problem), foolishness (the seduction of Joseph) and a ruler's abuse of power over his subjects (Solomon). The *qiṣaṣ* of al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī, in their own right, add their own voices of advice on what could endanger a friendship. The advisory spirit of the *qiṣaṣ* explores such negative characteristics as ruthlessness, pride, foolishness and self-gratification.

The receipt of good counsel is the crucial benefit of friendship. In al-Ṭabarī's time, the balance of power between a ruler and his advisors is an added benefit from such friendships (e.g., al-Qāsim °Ubayd Allāh and the Caliph al-Muqtafi). Al-Qāsim helped the Caliph during the adversity of the Qarmatians. This type of friendship seems to be an alliance between a ruler and his vizier. Al-Ṭabarī adds to Kay Kā'ūs' idea of tested friendship that it brings out the benefit of the political stability of the caliphate. It is not the royal imprint of the caliph or his superficial profile which

makes a good leader; al-Ṭabarī dismisses the royal image attached to a king-ruler but stresses the capacity to deal with political relations by creating a milieu for sharing counsel. Sharing secrets may be detrimental to friendships, but sharing wisdom enhances such friendships. Pharaoh benefits from Joseph's wise interpretation of his dream. This resonates with Ibn al-Muqaffa^c's suggestion that a ruler should create a milieu of trust in order to make good counsel possible. This stance suggests that political threats were commonplace at the time of al-Ṭabarī's stay in Baghdād, hence his *qiṣaṣ* advise the building of a trust-based milieu in which the sharing of wisdom can enhance the caliph's leadership.

It seems that during al-Ṭabarī's time, the empire was still active in searching for knowledge of new territories to spread the message of Islam. This goal required credible leadership and functional friendship between a ruler and his advisors. With this in mind, al-Ṭabarī suggests two types of friendships available to the prophet/ruler, one characterised by strict obedience (demons/slaves as narrative example) and the other by risk-taking loyalty (the hoopoe). The risk-taking loyalty is more radical and daring in comparison to Ibn al-Muqaffa^c's thought on friendship with the ruler. The demons advise on domestic matters upon request, while the hoopoe counsels on foreign and international relations pertaining to the empire. In al-Ṭabarī's mind he has an awareness of the potential of Islam to grow, not just as a local religious phenomenon but also a political reality in world affairs and sees it as part of the ruler's duty to explore and expand.

The ruler can achieve these objectives, according to al-Ṭabarī, by cultivating friendships. His David narrative shows a ruler whose loneliness and pride lead to an illusion of self-sufficiency and deprive him of good counsel, even from God. He is

not the ideal ruler because he is no friend to his people, and his pride stops him from receiving good counsel. In contrast, al-Ṭabarī's Joseph befriends many who cross his path and proves his loyalty by using his ability to interpret dreams to help others. Hence Joseph in the narrative represents the dual function of a ruler and an advisor to rulers, because he has lived both the life of a servant-slave and then a life of a ruler. Joseph's friendship both in its loyalty and trust enabled him to overcome the social obstacles which often prevent qualified and wise people to reach high official offices.

Al-Tha'labī's narrative offers a different perspective on friendship and power. He adds to al-Ṭabarī's thoughts and opens a window on the intricate relationships of the rulers with their subjects in a region defined by distance from caliphal power in Baghdād. It is likely that al-Tha'labī is not addressing the caliphal court and its culture in Baghdād but the Khurāsānī political rulership.

In his narrative on Joseph, for instance, al-Tha'labī focuses more on Jacob's involvement in the rescue of Joseph. Jacob's physical touch on Joseph's chest is an unmistakable warning which complements the message that only fools fall prey to seduction; this resonates with the idea put forward by Ibn al-Muqaffa' and Kay Kā'ūs to avoid the company of fools and their influences. Al-Tha'labī portrays this warning in his evocation of the appearance of Jacob's ethereal presence to prevent Joseph from succumbing to Rā'il.

There is a mixed message about the ruler's attachment to political images at the edge of the empire in al-Tha'labī's time. On the one hand, in his narrative on Joseph, Joseph is crowned king in the presence of and with the approval of the King of Egypt, who pledges his trust and loyalty to Joseph in culmination of the friendship between them, a friendship based on trust and justice. On the other hand, in the story

of Solomon al-Tha[°]labī stresses the importance of being a humble ruler-king, a friend of people in all social ranks. Therefore his sense of friendship goes beyond the court milieu because counsel could be found outside the court and among the common people.

Al-Tha[°]labī uses his narrative on *friendship* to strongly discourage the desire for self-glorification common among the rulers who are not monarchs but who behave with royal pride. The Nīshāpūran author stresses purity of conduct of the ruler and his sense of altruism.

Al-Tha[°]labī's view on friends sharing secrets is different from that of Kay Kā[°]ūs. This shows that al-Tha[°]labī stands in his own right as an advisor, and that he does not just echo the dominant political theory of his time about the types of friendships a ruler should entertain; in fact, al-Tha[°]labī proposes an ideal of a ruler that is different from both al-Ṭabarī and Kay Kā[°]ūs. In his narrative, there is an example where secrets are carriers of wisdom and cause harmony rather than enmity. Hiding such secrets of the heart prevents sharing good counsel. The ant, though of lower social rank than a king, is one good advisor who encourages Solomon to share the secret wisdom of his tranquil heart to bring harmony to his kingdom. A king can create harmony through the acceptance of all social classes, by realising that subjects of lower social class can also possess wisdom and, if treated with respect, would readily share it with their rulers. In this way, al-Tha[°]labī is challenging the Ṣūfis' negative attitude against kings by suggesting that proper counsel can produce well-balanced leaders with positive political ramifications. Al-Tha[°]labī's thoughts and advice to his temporal rulers begin with the idea of true authority, which he believes to be wisdom located in the heart and not in the ostentatious trappings of royalty. A

ruler in possession of a tranquil heart, he thinks, will treat the secrets of other friends with respect. Al-Tha[°]labī's view of his society in Nīshāpūr is that all social classes work in unison rather than a society fragmented by social class and privileges.

Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha[°]labī propose that rulers should be friends with their subjects. This is a major deviation from Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] and Kay Kā[°]ūs' advice literature. Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] advises a ruler to create a friendly milieu in order for his friends to give good counsel. Kay Kā[°]ūs in contrast views adversity as ground for testing people's friendship to the ruler; but neither of them advises the ruler to be a friend.

As a final comment about what this means for the concept of "empire" in both authors, al-Ṭabarī's sense of friendship differs from al-Tha[°]labī's concerning the political side of friendship. Al-Ṭabarī, though being a religious man, seems disinclined to portray the ideal ruler as a mystic, but rather the ruler should fit the time-old institution of the caliphate. In this way, al-Ṭabarī sees friendship of a ruler as a catalyst and the hope for political unity of the empire under one caliph. This is in response to the caliphate's gradual downfall in Baghdād. Al-Tha[°]labī, in comparison, views friendships in terms of having the potential to create harmony and working relations among social classes; it corresponds to and challenges of the social hierarchy in Nīshāpūr. This harmony is expected to flow from the tranquillity of the ruler's heart. This also means that a ruler must deserve his status. Despite the differences between al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha[°]labī, they probably agree that a sound empire starts with a sound ruler who is a friend and capable to make friends in order receive good counsel.

Chapter Five

5.0 Enmity

5.1 Preliminary thoughts

Enmity is a fact of life for prophets and their missions. In this chapter the narratives of our three prophets of study will be analysed in terms of adversity. It is a fair assumption that enmity in the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*⁶⁵⁵ presumes an “enemy” who poses a challenge to a prophet’s leadership; this challenge entails plans to curtail the prophet’s freedom to live out his virtues and if successful such a challenge will lead him to chaos, socio-political anarchy and spiritual desolation.

The advice literature of Ibn al-Muqaffa^c (*al-Adab al-kabīr*) in the eighth century and Kay Kā'ūs (*Qābūs-nāma*) in the tenth century cautions the ruler (the caliph or the sulṭān) about the enemy and his hostile tactics. Their counsel regarding the challenges and adversities of leadership in their time, particularly their suggestions on recognising and dealing with the enemy, will be discussed below. I hope to show how this wellspring of traditional advice literature relates to the narratives of the prophets Joseph, David and Solomon found in the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* and the influence they may in turn have had on the leaders of their time.

5.1.2 The “enemy” in *al-Adab al-kabīr*

According to *al-Adab al-kabīr*, the enemy could be of three kinds: one who seeks the death of another; one who seeks a peaceful alliance to suspend hostilities; and one who stays aloof from direct involvement with the ruler.⁶⁵⁵ The first kind seems to be Ibn al-Muqaffa^c’s main concern; however, all three seem to be treated as

⁶⁵⁵ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 100.

political enemies rather than personal adversaries. Ibn al-Muqaffa^c advises caution in all cases, freedom from personal defects, courage in dealing with the enemy and mistrust of the enemy. Each of these four pieces of advice pre-supposes that the enemy could never be a potential friend, but one who is to be conquered either by death, exile, or the shame of public exposure.

In terms of caution, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c advises that a caliph should not reveal much of his thoughts, his wit and his intention of making peace.⁶⁵⁶ Specifically he writes:

Let it be known, whatever you consider of your enemy and envier, that you benefit nothing by informing him that you are indeed his enemy; lest you warn him about you and permit him to fight you before any preparation or opportunity [to prepare yourself], and so you charge him to raise his weapon and kindle his fire upon you.⁶⁵⁷

Later he writes to the same effect:

It is best for your dignity that your enemy sees that you do not take him as your opponent so that he remains inattentive [about your hostility] and about your control of him.⁶⁵⁸

The author even cautions that the caliph hide any good intentions from the enemy, for it puts him in a position of weakness and draws attention [from others] to himself:

If you will peace let reverence reign in your heart in all cases, without letting this reverence be revealed [to others] through you, lest they pursue you and what you revere.⁶⁵⁹

He stresses the importance of knowing your enemy, for in knowing their faults and defects one gains self-knowledge and can ensure that these defects do not resonate in him. He writes:

⁶⁵⁶ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 98.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 97.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 98.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 99.

Your best defence against your enemy and the most powerful victory is gathering all your faults and defects which you find in the enemy; then you discern each fault which you see and hear about in others: did you disdain this fault or its likes and are currently free from it?⁶⁶⁰

Another suggested tactic is to befriend the inner social circle of the enemy, to gain an alliance against him with those close to him. This advice builds on the former recommendation that the caliph keep to himself his own thought and intention, so that the enemy may never know of any impending hostility,

What is possible in your affair with your enemy is to befriend his companions and to fraternise his siblings, so that you can penetrate in between [your enemy] and [his acquaintances] for the purpose of disunity, struggle and aloofness until they all become one flock of hostility against him.⁶⁶¹

The last two pieces of advice mentioned above, courage and mistrust of the enemy, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c offers in a different context, one in which hostility is already known between a ruler and his enemy. In this case, absolute courage is an essential virtue and should be coupled with a deliberate contempt for the enemy:

In the event you are involved in fighting your enemy, then follow the way I described for you: be conscious of reverence and manifest courage and scorn while you remain steadfast cautious in your affairs; let courage reign in your heart until your heart is full of courage and your deed be spent in caution.⁶⁶²

Ibn al-Muqaffa^c's counsel seems to be psychologically oriented—in knowing your enemy you are able to limit or destroy his hostility. In the majority of cases, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c assures the leader that infiltration is an effective tactic for overcoming

⁶⁶⁰ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 100.

⁶⁶¹ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 98.

⁶⁶² Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, *al-Adab*, 99.

the enemy, and encourages false friendliness with the leader and those close to him in order to know his secrets. Further, by knowing the enemy's defects, the wise ruler himself will recognize and overcome similar defects.

5.1.3 The "enemy" in *Qābūs-nāma*

The enemy in *Qābūs-nāma* is also political. However, Kay Kā'ūs does not divide the enemy into separate categories and his advice is the same for all. The enemy is never to be trusted, never to be considered a potential friend, although the author does admit that even as enmity may arise from friendship, friendship may emerge from enmity.⁶⁶³ However, he gives no examples or illustrations in the *Qābūs-nāma* of such a possibility.⁶⁶⁴ Kay Kā'ūs insists rather that the sultān outwit and wound his enemy.⁶⁶⁵ Accordingly, the sultān should face the enemy only once his secrets are known in order to maximise the harm inflicted. Like Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, Kay Kā'ūs agrees that the sultān should not instigate hostilities for it is better to be known as a friend than a combatant⁶⁶⁶ – but he assures the ruler that there is a sense of triumph in killing the enemy.⁶⁶⁷ Victory over an enemy is boldly stated in the *Qābūs-nāma*, "Begin to destroy the enemy before he starts to destroy you."⁶⁶⁸

Unlike Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, Kay Kā'ūs does not view the enemy as someone to learn from, but only to triumph over. Getting to know the enemy's shortcomings for the sultān's personal improvement is not necessary.⁶⁶⁹ He suggests instead that distance must be kept between the ruler and his enemy. Kay Kā'ūs offers the sultān

⁶⁶³ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 135.

⁶⁶⁴ The enemy is not to be despised, even if he is worthless. See Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 133.

⁶⁶⁵ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 132.

⁶⁶⁶ He is better off "to be a man of friends than of enemies"; see Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 135.

⁶⁶⁷ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 136.

⁶⁶⁸ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 133.

⁶⁶⁹ However, if a fault is found, the ruler should eliminate its cause. See Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 138.

the following suggestions: never praise someone too highly for it will make it harder to criticise him for a future fault;⁶⁷⁰ any association with fools, miserly people, and boon companions, and frequent consort with women is strongly discouraged lest they inadvertently learn your secrets;⁶⁷¹ ostentatious celebrations or ceremonies should be avoided lest glory be tainted with vanity; moderation in emotion, for an enemy is neither to be despised nor his hatred ever to be forgotten. Simply put, the enemy is to be conquered.

5.1.4 A general definition of the “enemy”

It is obvious, given the above, that both Ibn al-Muqaffa^c and Kay Kā³ūs have specific ideas on how to recognise and overcome an enemy. Ibn al-Muqaffa^c urges the ruler to keep his own counsel but to be cunning and astute in learning the secrets of his enemy, if necessary through false friendships. He can learn from the defects of his enemy. When confrontation becomes necessary, the *ruler* must show great courage and audacity. In comparison, Kay Kā³ūs is more radical in his approach to the enemy; the enemy is to be brutally overpowered for nothing can be learned from him that is worthy of being noted. The main caution is to beware of sharing secrets with others, particularly fools, self-serving friends and manipulative people.

Ibn al-Muqaffa^c seems in his advice to be more socially oriented in dealing with the enemy while Kay Kā³ūs is more circumspect and likes to keep the enemy at a distance. Ibn al-Muqaffa^c cautions against brutalising the enemy except as a last resort and then to attack with great courage; Kay Kā³ūs advises ruthlessness as the only approach expected from a sultān. Such differences mirror the cultural contexts

⁶⁷⁰ Kay Kā³ūs, *Qābūs*, 138.

⁶⁷¹ Kay Kā³ūs, *Qābūs*, 138-139.

between Ibn al-Muqaffa^c's Baghdād in the eighth century and Kay Kā'ūs's region of Gurgān in the eleventh century. Kay Kā'ūs views a larger group of enemies, not necessarily all are close to him, yet all of them have to be conquered. This reflects the difficulty of the Ziyārid dynasty in the tenth-eleventh century period in the Gurgān province. At one time, Qābūs the son of Wushmgir was supported by the Sāmānids and then by Būyids in order to ascend to his throne; but this support soured in time and his support came from the Ghaznavid ruler, Maḥmūd of Ghazna.⁶⁷² Eventually, Qābūs was so oppressive, in his second reign,⁶⁷³ against his army generals that it led to his downfall⁶⁷⁴ (d.1012/402), when he was replaced by his son Manūčīhr. Given this background, it is no wonder that by the end of the eleventh century Kay Kā'ūs's advice on the enemy is far from amiable and highly suspicious of alliances among rulers.

Since in the Baghdādī court, the caliph was the centre of attention and all the activities in the court were in accordance with his commands and wishes, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c highlights the importance of diplomacy and leaving the military side of things to the commander of the army; by the eleventh century when the Seljūks came to power, the army commander was in effect the ruler and the sulṭān was quite militant.⁶⁷⁵

Now that enmity and enemy have been considered from the perspective of two great writers of advice literature, it is time to examine the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* to

⁶⁷² See C.E. Bosworth, "Ziyārids", in *ET*², volume 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 539.

⁶⁷³ C.E. Bosworth, "Qābūs b. Wushmagīrb. Ziyār, Shams al-Ma'ālī Abu'l- Ḥasan", in *ET*², volume 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 357.

⁶⁷⁴ R. Hartmann and J.A Boyle, "Gurgān" in *ET*², volume 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 1141.

⁶⁷⁵ See Dominique Sourdel, *Medieval Islam*, translated by J.M. Watt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 125-129. The author spells out how the power structure in the ninth century was based on the caliph, the *amīr* or army commander and the *qāḍī*, at a time when the caliph still commanded the many territories within the empire. As time passed, the army commander became stronger and undermined the caliph's power; often a vizier became *de facto* the ruler of the caliphate.

reveal their perspective on enmity, and the challenge and adversity it brings to the lives of the prophets Joseph, David and Solomon as seen from the centre and the edge of the empire. Who is the enemy in each narrative? What does he/she reveal about how a prophet (leader) meets the challenge of enmity and deals with the adversity it causes? How are the lessons from these narratives related to the times of al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī?

5.2 Al-Ṭabarī's Joseph

5.2.1 Enmity through family trickery

Enmity in the narrative life of Joseph centres on his family. Enmity is first encountered during Joseph's early childhood. His paternal aunt who has raised Joseph in his early years loves him to a possessive degree;⁶⁷⁶ Jacob's fondness for his son grows as Joseph gets older, and he wants him back. The dialogue between Jacob and his sister shows the tension between her possessiveness and his anxiety, "O little sister! Hand Joseph over to me, for by God I cannot stand to have him away from me for another hour. She said, 'but, by God, I will not give him either.'"⁶⁷⁷

The conflict which arises between Jacob and his sister creates enmity between them leading his sister to use deceit or trickery to resolve the situation. The aunt places a valuable belt belonging to the prophet Isaac on Joseph under his attire. She then claims that the belt is missing. During a search of her household it is found on Joseph. Hence he is considered a thief which according to the family gives his aunt the full right to keep him under her care. Jacob can do nothing. This trickery solves the tension between Jacob and his sister.

⁶⁷⁶ Al-Ṭabarī does not name Joseph's aunt. See his *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 200 / *History*, volume 2, 149.

⁶⁷⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 200 / *History*, volume 2, 149.

Joseph returns to Jacob's household after his aunt's death, and once again enmity arises within the family. This time it is the *ʿuṣbah*, his step-brothers, who resort to trickery and deceit. Al-Ṭabarī uses al-Suddī's source which ranks Joseph as nobler than his step-brothers even before they start to abuse him verbally and physically.⁶⁷⁸ Seeing Jacob's great affection for Joseph, they hatch a devious plot. The step-brothers persuade their father, despite his concern about wolves in the wilderness, to allow young Joseph to play with them in the desert under their care.

The malice of the *ʿuṣbah* that isolates Joseph from his father's affection becomes so extreme that Judah must interfere and remind his brothers of a pact they have made among themselves that Joseph will not be killed.⁶⁷⁹ Judah also brings him food during Joseph's four days inside the well. In the narrative the *ʿuṣbah*'s concern now shifts from killing Joseph to resolving the problem of what to do with him. They fear that if he returns home, young Joseph will tell his father how he has been treated.

In al-Ṭabarī's narrative, Jacob is aware of the malice of his sons toward Joseph. Upon hearing from them that Joseph has been devoured by a wolf, he does not wail with grief; in fact, he expresses no external signs of grief but rather patience (*ṣabr*).⁶⁸⁰ His reply to his sons indicates that he suspects their story is untrue, and he says: "No, your minds have beguiled you into something. It is best to be patient."⁶⁸¹ The patience Jacob advocates does not alleviate his suffering; it just contains it. The

⁶⁷⁸ The Arabic words for being nobler than his brothers are "wa bihi ʿalaihim karama". See Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 201 / *History*, volume 2, 150.

⁶⁷⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 201 / *History*, volume 2, 150.

⁶⁸⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 201 / *History*, volume 2, 151.

⁶⁸¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 201 / *History*, volume 2, 151. Cf. Q 12:18. See n.1652 ʿAbdullah Yūsuf ʿAlī's translation of the Qurʾān in *The Meaning of the Holy Qurʾān* (Beltsville: Amana publications, 1999), 550, where he describes that the patience of Jacob as an old man facing the calamity of his son's disappearance has to do with imploring God's assistance. The exercise of *ṣabr* is an act of faith in the One.

ṣabr is al-Ṭabarī's lesson on the proper way to face calamity—with patience and fortitude. The meaning of *ṣabr* varies and depends on the context. In general, it is associated with suffering and being patient in the face of adversity.⁶⁸² In the case of Jacob, *ṣabr* is used to denote resignation⁶⁸³ associated with the Qurʾānic term *al-ṣabru jamīl*. But it is not passive resignation, rather a resignation which awaits the disclosure of the malice against Joseph. Jacob is patient, confident that in time the full truth of the calamity will be known.

Within al-Ṭabarī's concept of *ṣabr*, there are two factors in play: the hidden malice of the step-brothers and Joseph's revelation, unknown to his brothers, inside the well. Jacob in his *ṣabr* intuitively knows both secrets, but not fully. God has promised Joseph that in time these secrets will be known:

God described how He revealed to Joseph, while Joseph was in the well, that he would one day tell his brothers what they had done to him; the brothers did not know of this revelation to Joseph.⁶⁸⁴

Yet, Jacob's grief is contained within his *ṣabr*. This is because al-Ṭabarī defines *ṣabr* as “no violent grief over the loss of his son.”⁶⁸⁵ The author interweaves patience with grief and there is no ritual of wailing. Jacob entrusts his grief only to God. This view from the centre portrays enmity in the form of family deceit, with a suggestion on how to react to its repercussions by practising *ṣabr* or patience.

⁶⁸² A.J. Wensinck, “Ṣabr”, in *EF*², volume 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 685.

⁶⁸³ A.J. Wensinck, “Ṣabr”, 685.

⁶⁸⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 201 / *History*, volume 2, 151. In his *Jamīʿ al-bayān* he explains ‘patience’ (*ṣabr jamīl*) in Q 12:18 as endurance against the malice shown by Jacob's sons against Joseph. He indicates that *ṣabr* is pure and free from doubt or falsity. In this way, *ṣabr* is the praxis of wisdom. *Ṣabr* is a patience which waits for the truth of Joseph's disappearance. See al-Ṭabarī, *Jamīʿ al-bayān*, volume 12 (Egypt: Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī wa sharikaʾuhū, 1968), 165-166.

⁶⁸⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 215 / *History*, volume 2, 177.

5.2.2 Enmity within the context in Baghdād and during al-Ṭabarī's time

Al-Ṭabarī shows great insight into the power of enmity within families struggling to maintain social power in Baghdād and in the extended regions of the empire. Before al-Ṭabarī's arrival in Baghdād⁶⁸⁶ in 870/256, Baghdād's leadership was already marred by family tension between two step-brothers, sons of the Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd: al-Ma'mūn and al-Amīn. Al-Ma'mūn's base of power was initially in Merv, while al-Amīn's was in Baghdād. This division of power polarized the °Abbāsīd administration for a time. The enmity between the two brothers materialized when al-Ma'mūn started to gain some independence. His brother, fearing his growing power deposed him as an heir to power.⁶⁸⁷ But al-Ma'mūn retaliated by sending an army to besiege Baghdād in 811/195 and defeating his brother.⁶⁸⁸ This enmity between the two step-brothers affected the future of the city.

Those readers in al-Ṭabarī's time may have been able to see the analogy between the story of Joseph and his stepbrothers and the two sons of Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd. They would also be able to relate the story of Joseph trapped in the well with the story of Caliph al-Mu'tamid (d. 892/278),⁶⁸⁹ who was forced to remain in the city of Sāmarrā' under the influence of the Turkish guards. He was inexperienced in politics and rather ineffective; his own brother al-Muwaffaq, though he was not officially the legitimate caliph, kept al-Mu'tamid under check in Sāmarrā'. Al-Mu'tamid tried in 882/268 to escape to Cairo and to be under the refuge of Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn (ruler of Egypt and Syria) but his attempt failed. Effectively, the political

⁶⁸⁶ The tension between the two brothers, though it preceded al-Ṭabarī's arrival in Baghdād, portrays how the ruling family projected the struggle for power into the immediate future of Baghdād.

⁶⁸⁷ Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdād*, 90-91.

⁶⁸⁸ Kennedy, *When Baghdād*, 91.

⁶⁸⁹ Hugh Kennedy, "Al-Mu'tamid °Alā°-Llāh", in *ET*, volume 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 765.

power in Baghdād during the 880s/266-275 was in the hands of the caliph's vizier and his brother, al-Muwaffaq (d. 891/277) who managed to wrest power in the province of Fars from the control of the Ṣaffarids and restore it to the ʿAbbāsids, after which he and his son, Abū'l ʿAbbās crushed the Zanj rebellion in south ʿIrāq.⁶⁹⁰

It seems that al-Ṭabarī implicitly advises his temporal rulers to be vigilant against enmity and the trickery and deceit it breeds in their enemies. His narrative does not deny the reality of political trickery even by those who are quite close to the caliph. But like the prophet Jacob, rulers should face every calamity that hits their administration, family and jurisdiction with the religious attitude of *ṣabr*, for an immediate, violent reaction can be counter-productive. Jacob serves as his perfect example. Instead of imprisoning his sons for their cruel treatment of their brother, Jacob allows time for the truth of their crime to emerge, seeking their confession without coercion. Al-Ṭabarī expects the same restraint and wisdom from the caliphs of his time.

5.3 Al-Thaʿlabī's Joseph

5.3.1 The family trickery: justification and ramification

Al-Thaʿlabī re-arranges al-Ṭabarī's narrative plot of Joseph by inserting the trickery of the aunt at the end of the narrative as opposed to its beginning.⁶⁹¹ Al-Thaʿlabī links family deceit in Joseph's family with a similar story in Abraham's

⁶⁹⁰ Hugh Kennedy, "Al-Muwaffaq Ṭalḥa b. Djaʿfar", in *EF*², volume 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 801.

⁶⁹¹ As mentioned in Chapters Three and Four, the beginning of al-Thaʿlabī's narrative of Joseph is devoted to his cosmic beauty.

narrative, which deals with thieves: once a thief is caught he becomes the property of the household owner.⁶⁹²

The second piece of trickery mentioned in the narrative involves Joseph's stepbrothers. They convince Joseph that going into the desert with them will be an enjoyable experience: "They kindled his desire so much that finally it was he who asked to join (them). He said, "Brothers, go to my father and ask him to send me with you."⁶⁹³

The step-brothers then convince Jacob that Joseph will be safe with them and that no wolf can harm him, for Judah (one of the step-brothers) is capable of killing a lion, and Simeon's wrathful scream can make a pregnant woman give birth on the spot.⁶⁹⁴ They are able to keep their intentions hidden from Joseph. Therefore there are two prongs to their forked tongues convincing Joseph to go with them and their false promise to Jacob that he will be protected.

Even as they abuse Joseph, insult him and throw him inside the Well of Sorrow without mercy, they do not realise that their brother also has a secret. This secret is God's intervention through an angel who clothes him and strengthens him to face the harshness and vulnerability inside the Well of Sorrow. The peaceful strength of the angelic alliance with Joseph remains a secret; hence the stepbrothers have no chance to overcome Joseph. Joseph as a prophet clothed in Abraham's shirt belongs to an inner social circle of angels who advise young Joseph on how to pray in order to relieve his stress during his calamity. In his distress he prays:

Creator of all being! Healer of all that is broken! Who is present at every gathering, and hears all secret talk, Who is ever near, never far away.

⁶⁹² Al-Tha^clabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 133 / *Tales*, 220. Al-Ṭabarī, in contrast, does not provide details of the family rule.

⁶⁹³ Al-Tha^clabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 112 / *Tales*, 188.

⁶⁹⁴ Al-Tha^clabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 112 / *Tales*, 188.

Companion of every lonely soul, the Victor, Who is ever vanquished; the knower of hidden things; Ever-Living, never to die; Reviver of the dead, there is no god but You, glory be to You! I ask You, Who deserves all praise, Creator of Heavens and Earth, Who holds all power and is all splendour and nobility: I ask You (may You bless Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad) to deliver me and bestow Your bounty on me, both the expected and the unexpected.⁶⁹⁵

Teaching Joseph to pray is a creative feature of al-Thaʿlabī's narrative which deals with enmity. Al-Thaʿlabī tends to include the prophets' words or prayers to aid a prophet in dealing with stress. This is not the only place in the narratives where the prayer of a prophet in distress is spelled out in detail.⁶⁹⁶ This emphasis on prayer is highlighted in al-Thaʿlabī's narrative, and is not used in al-Ṭabarī. In a sense these prayers appear when the rulers face helpless situation and accordingly the prayers are expressions of helplessness which are addressed to God. Al-Thaʿlabī does not have a court mentality (al-Ṭabarī is closer to courts) and thus he tends in his narrative to address adversities spiritually.

When related to the context of his time, the Well of Sorrows could have been in al-Thaʿlabī's context as a symbol of the retreat places (*khānaqās*) in Nīshāpūr which were thought to be the catalysts for intense personal prayer, particularly pleas for protection against the threats of the enemy. The captivity of Joseph also parallels the isolation of mystical places for prayer. Al-Thaʿlabī regards prayer as the shield of a prophet and the well becomes an image of sanctuary, a holy place inspiring prayer. He describes the light that appears once Joseph is inside the well: "When Joseph was thrown into the well, the well became light for him and its water sweet."⁶⁹⁷ The view from the edge suggests that a ruler faced by adversity and despair could find

⁶⁹⁵ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 114 / *Tales*, 191.

⁶⁹⁶ It is also in David's long lamentation. See al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 283 / *Tales*, 474.

⁶⁹⁷ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 113 / *Tales*, 190.

guidance in prayer —just as Joseph is favoured with an angelic alliance to sustain him in his isolation and suffering.

In al-Tha^clabī Jacob's reaction to the news about Joseph's death is not met initially with the wisdom of *ṣabr*; rather he questions their story and goes through a ritual of grief:

When they told Jacob about Joseph, he wept greatly and said to them, "Show me the shirt," and they showed it. He said, "By God, I have never before seen [a day] like this, nor a wolf with as little ferocity as this one, devouring my son without leaving the slightest rip in the collar or anywhere else in the shirt." He cried out, then fell down in a faint and awoke only after a long time. At last he regained his senses and, deeply sobbing, held on to the shirt – smelling it, kissing it – and put it on face and eyes.⁶⁹⁸

In his grief, the shirt becomes an item of great worth to Jacob, for it is all that he has left of Joseph. Yet al-Tha^clabī's Jacob is aware that the shirt is not telling the whole story of Joseph's death. The wolf, in his own defence, speaks:

Then the wolf spoke, 'Nay, by your white hair, prophet of Allāh! I did not devour any of your sons. Your flesh and your blood, O you prophets, is forbidden to us. Verily, I have been wronged and lies have been told about me, for I am a foreign wolf from the land of Egypt.' He said, 'What brought you to the land of Canaan?' He said, 'I have come because of kinship with some wolves whom I visit and with whom I am connected.'⁶⁹⁹

In al-Tha^clabī it is after the wolf's testimony that Jacob confronts his sons with the Qur^ānic verse (Q12:18), which stipulates patience in such instances. Al-Tha^clabī does not situate *ṣabr* at the centre of grief; rather the lies of the step-brothers take centre place in this calamity.

In al-Tha^clabī's narrative, the wolf stands for scapegoats in society—those who face false accusations. From his reply to Jacob, it further seems that the wolf belongs to a large network of contacts in the countryside who revere all prophets.

⁶⁹⁸ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 115 / *Tales*, 193.

⁶⁹⁹ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 116 / *Tales*, 193.

However, they are not fully accepted as the mainstream, hence they remain in the countryside. The wolf is the target of an unjust enmity; the real enemy remains hidden. Generally, the Ṣūfīs were not particularly political activists; the question is: have they been perceived as a threat to the rulers? This depends on how they were perceived by other religious movements or legal schools who have political influences upon the ruler so that the ruler may have perceived them as a threat to him. Al-Thaʿlabī is likely advising the rulers that they should not expect enmity from the Ṣūfīs and discern the likely apprehension against the Ṣūfīs from other Muslim groups, such as the Ḥanafīs in Khurāsān.

However, the wolf may also represent Joseph in absentia. Both face enmity from the step-brothers; both are innocent. The innocence of a wolf is a trope in Persian literature: “I am Joseph’s wolf, oh Lord, make a wolfish peace with Joseph’s wolf.”⁷⁰⁰ This approach is in contrast to the stereotypical attitude against wolves in general, for they are often perceived as untamed and aggressive.⁷⁰¹ Even Jacob fears the wolf, expressing that fear to his sons when they ask to take Joseph with them into the desert. Al-Thaʿlabī’s wolf remains passive, not aggressive, in his dialogue with Jacob, giving his words credibility.

In the context of al-Thaʿlabī’s time the story of the wolf speaks to the inner tension in Khurāsān between the Ṣūfīs, the Ismaʿīlīs and the traditionalists (or the Sunnīs). When the wolf admits that he has kin in Canaan and Egypt it is likely that it

⁷⁰⁰ Christian Lange, *Justice, punishment and the medieval Muslim imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), n.262, 94. The footnote refers to an Iranian poem regarding the “wolfish peace” written by ʿAzīz al-dīn al-Mustawfī.

⁷⁰¹ Arabian wolves are not inclined to howl to give warning of their presence because the desert wind overwhelms the sound of their howling. This explains why a wolf-attack in the desert is terrifying and sudden. See Allan S. Gilbert, “The native fauna of the ancient Near East,” in *A history of the animal world in the ancient Near East*, edited by Billie Jean Collins (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 26.

represents the Ṣūfīs, not the Shīʿites with their set doctrine.⁷⁰² The Ṣūfīs had networks throughout Khurāsān attempting to convert the illiterate to Islam. In addition, the Ṣūfīs were neither entirely trusted as a group nor fully accepted among the Muslim traditionalists, nor did they enjoy political immunity from the rest of Islam. They were targeted at times for their lifestyle of poverty which challenged other wealthy Muslims at the time⁷⁰³ and accordingly they had to face the blame for something they did not cause, as alluded to in the narrative. However, in the narrative the wolf informs Jacob of his innocence against Joseph because of his esteem to the prophets.⁷⁰⁴

5.4 Al-Ṭabarī's David

5.4.1 Enmity against David: Goliath

David has three potential enemies: Goliath, Saul and David himself. Goliath (Jālūt), a giant, foolishly relies on the power of his physical strength; his army is as brutish as he. Saul (Ṭālūt), the leader of the Israelites, is unable to defend his people against Goliath and seeks a champion. The security of the Israelites has become a matter of grave concern. David, as the chosen one, inherits Goliath as his enemy and confronts him.

In the narrative, David seems the most unlikely candidate to face Goliath, for he is small in stature and arms himself only with a sling and three stones. The courage David manifests derives from his faith in his prophetic ancestry (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). This faith compensates for David's small stature. In his childhood

⁷⁰² See Jonathan P. Berkey, *The formation*, 234-35, for the Shīʿī relationship with the Ṣūfīs whose doctrines of knowledge *al-bāṭin* and *al-maʿrifat* respectively challenge the Sunnīs' exoteric *ʿilm*.

⁷⁰³ Berkey, *The formation*, 157.

⁷⁰⁴ See n. 158 in my Chapter One, 62.

he has demonstrated unusual abilities: he rides a lion fearlessly without resistance from the lion; he shoots an arrow with precision; and even the hills and mountains join him in worship.⁷⁰⁵ David's special skills are a sign of his prophecy, yet his small size causes people to underestimate him. Even his own father fails to recognize his gifts and sends him to shepherd cattle in the countryside. As a result David is belittled for thinking he can protect the Israelites from Goliath.

David's initial triumph against Goliath is not based on knowing the secrets of his enemy, for David has not yet developed any sense of political craftsmanship; but facing Goliath is the first mandate David receives from the prophet Samuel and King Saul. David is summoned by the prophet Samuel and King Saul,⁷⁰⁶ for he has been chosen to face and kill Goliath. If he succeeds, he has been promised the hand of Saul's daughter in marriage and a share in his kingdom.⁷⁰⁷ In this way, should David succeed in killing Goliath, Saul will have an ally who is also his son-in-law. Saul's choice is politically motivated for he needs to improve his political profile, for his popularity had suffered among the Israelites because of his failure to defeat Goliath.

David shows great courage in meeting Goliath. In al-Ṭabarī's narrative a short conversation ensues between David and Goliath. Goliath assumes he is stronger than David and wants to spare him if he retreats: "He [Goliath] said to him, 'O chap, pull back since I offer you mercy rather than I kill you;,' David replied, 'No, instead I am here to kill you.'"⁷⁰⁸ This dialogue demonstrates the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed. It highlights Goliath's physical strength and David's physical weakness. Courage, strategy and faith are David's strengths; Goliath's

⁷⁰⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 136.

⁷⁰⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 136.

⁷⁰⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 136

⁷⁰⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 136

brutishness and overconfidence are his foolish weaknesses. Goliath represents the fool who takes no time to know his enemy. David chooses courage rather than the fear of Goliath, despite his brutish look and arrogant attitude for he is well aware of the secret of his own strength— a combination of faith in the One God (who aided his ancestry in difficult times) and his ability to use his sling.

Al-Ṭabarī's David teaches the reader that strategy is essential in engaging the enemy. Even the finest arms and the biggest army cannot win a battle if there is no strategy in place. Other vital weapons in the caliph's arsenal, according to al-Ṭabarī, are courage and faith. Faith gives courage to the strength of a *jihādī* in the religious sense (promoting the path of God). For al-Ṭabarī a *jihādī* fight employs a technique that uses courage informed by faith and the simplicity of arms— a sling in the case of David. Ibn al-Muqaffa^c says nothing about arms technique when facing the enemy in his *Al-adab al-kabīr*. Kay Kā'ūs gives a systematic instruction on military approach against the enemy without any intention of a single step of retreat, and to reward those who fight victoriously.⁷⁰⁹ Thus, the preparation needed and advocated in the early advice literature is complemented by fighting strategies in al-Ṭabarī's narrative of David.

5.4.2 Saul's enmity and David's astuteness

Once David marries into Saul's household tension rises between the two men. Saul notices the growing public affection and admiration for David. Saul gets jealous (*wajada fī nafsīhi wa ḥasadahu*)⁷¹⁰ and he deliberately tries to kill David. Al-Ṭabarī does not say how David knows of Saul's plot to kill him, but he is able to escape

⁷⁰⁹ Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs*, 220-221.

⁷¹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 137.

harm. The author relates two specific incidents. In the first attempt Saul sneaks into David's bed chamber at night and inserts his sword into a wineskin David has placed under his bedcover, thinking that it is David's body.⁷¹¹ In the second attempt on David's life Saul spots David from a distance in the forest and pursues him by horse. David hides inside a cave where he is protected by a spider which instantaneously weaves a web at the entrance to the cave. Saul, appearing at the entrance, sees the undisturbed web and looks no further.⁷¹²

Saul's hostility toward his son-in-law affects his judgement and the enmity he feels causes him to act irrationally. He becomes obsessed by his desire to kill David and his malice affects his leadership.

Al-Ṭabarī adds the element of God's alliance with David – who is a prophet – to the story of the spider weaving a web to protect David in the cave. It is an essential lesson in dealing with the enemy: the enemy of a prophet is the enemy of God.

It is interesting to note that while David has the courage to face Goliath with only a sling for protection, he flees from Saul and hides inside a cave where he is protected by a spider. This narrative paradox of David indicates that David's character is undergoing a change. As his popularity increases, his courage is compromised by external forces. In facing Goliath, David is but a shepherd boy and has no status to lose. David's life has changed greatly. He has gained the affection of the Israelites, has a share in the kingdom of Saul and is married to the king's daughter. He is unwilling to lose his new social status. Al-Ṭabarī tells of David's visit to Saul while he is sleeping in his bedchamber. Instead of killing this man who

⁷¹¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 137.

⁷¹² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 137.

has become his enemy, he places eight arrows around Saul's bed, two on each side to serve as a warning. David outsmarts his enemy.

Why does David not kill Saul? First, killing Saul in his sleep is an act of cowardice, and not *jihād* in the proper sense of Islam, because it neither serves God's to kill another Muslim nor does it protect the Israelites from Saul who is not their enemy.

Second, there is a pragmatic twist to David's decision not to kill Saul. It seems that Saul's hostility to David is not public knowledge, and if David kills him in his sleep, he risks his popular leadership, for a prophet does not kill another prophet or king. It would be preferable for David to expose Saul's hostility, for it would show his own integrity, enhance his public profile and be politically advantageous. Eventually Saul laments his attempts to kill David. In essence, Saul fails twice as king; he fails to protect his people from Goliath, while his hostility toward David proves fruitless and destructive against the martyred scholars. This is so because Saul becomes obsessed with the desire to kill David to the point where he even kills David's own supporters, the scholars, because they have advised Saul to let go of his hostility toward David.⁷¹³ A king cannot take a prophet of God as his enemy. Saul represents rulers whose hostility to credible leaders harms the common good of their state.

It seems that al-Ṭabarī differentiates between two enemies; the non-Muslim like Goliath whose death is well received and acceptable as *jihād*, and the Muslim. The Islamic ideal does not permit such enmity among Muslims. The enmity between Saul and David does not serve the path of God. It is futile hostility and far from the

⁷¹³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 137.

religious sense of *jihād*. Al-Ṭabarī in his exegetical work, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, highlights *jihād* historically as the tension between the Prophet Muḥammad and the polytheists who deliberately reject his message (Q 25:52). He writes that the promotion of the Qurʾānic message requires great conflict or *jihād*.⁷¹⁴ However, the exegetical al-Ṭabarī extends the meaning of *jihād* as above other acts of charity in order to promote God's path (*fī sabīl Allāh*); for example, any simple act of charity such as offering water to a pilgrim or building a mosque is inferior to *jihād*.⁷¹⁵ Only in the former case, *jihād* is a Muslim reaction to non-Muslims and in particular a Muslim policy against the non-Muslim enemies of the faith.

5.4.3 David's worst enemy: himself

Becoming king is a turning point in the life of David, for during his pious days of worship he reads about his prophetic ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They become inspirational figures because they faithfully passed the trials God sent to them.⁷¹⁶ He aspires to be a great prophet like them:

David says, 'O Lord! It seems to me that my forefathers have taken all goodness. Grant me the same as you have granted them! Do to me what you have done to them.' Then David begs God saying, 'O Lord! Test me as you have tested them, and grant me what you have given them.'⁷¹⁷

During their trials his ancestors experienced great loss. Abraham almost loses his life at the hands of Nimrod, Jacob loses his son Joseph for a long period of time, and

⁷¹⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āya al Qurʾān*, edited by Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī, volume 8 (Cairo: al-Ḥalabī wa sharikāʾuhū, 1968), 23.

⁷¹⁵ This is in reference to al-Ṭabarī's exegesis on Q 9:19. See *Jamiʿ*, volume 8 (Cairo: al-mayniyat Press, 1903). This edition does not have page numbers but the reference to Q 9:19 can be found in the exegetical pages of the *Sūrat al-Tawba*.

⁷¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 283 / *History*, volume 3, 144.

⁷¹⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 283 / *History*, volume 3, 144.

Isaac loses his sight. The strength of their faith and their dependency on God guide them through their ordeals.

As related in Chapter four, God accepts David's request for a trial but warns him to "be on guard".⁷¹⁸ David fails the trial for he is easily enticed away from his worship, becomes entranced by a bathing woman, wishes to possess her and commits murder to win her.

David's grave error is acting on the enmity that he bears against the woman's husband. As a ruler David has failed, for he does not heed God's advice to "be on guard". Ironically his actions parallel those of Saul, for his obsession deprives his people of his leadership and he loses their support.⁷¹⁹ In essence, there is a bit of Saul's jealousy and of Goliath's aggression in David. The defects of his two enemies resurface in David echoing the warning given by Ibn al-Muqaffa^c in his advice to the caliph to know the defects of his enemies; he spends time in lament to free himself from these flaws in his character. Since David had not reflected earlier on these defects, his crime against Uriah occurs at the expense of his leadership, his prophetic status and his self-worth. The murder of Uriah is not *jihād* but a selfish act against a fellow Muslim.

Al-Ṭabarī counsels rulers: *The end of an enemy is not the end of enmity*, for enmity could be motivated by one's pride and lust for acquisition and power. This is a conflict based solely on emotional impulses without a proper balance of faith. In this case, the leader and the enemy coincide within the psyche of the ruler whose

⁷¹⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 283 / *History*, volume 3, 144.

⁷¹⁹ Even his own son, Absalom, takes a stand against him. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 285 / *History*, volume 3, 149-150.

duty it is to guard the state from any enmity, external or internal, including his own personal defects.

The two narrative figures of Saul and David are representative of figures in the context of al-Ṭabarī's Baghdad. Saul represents the instability of the caliphate as a centralized authority and the lack of support it radiates to the rest of the empire in the ninth century. The unpopularity of Saul and his army due to their inability to confront and defeat Goliath parallels the general resentment of the Muslims in Baghdad against the Caliph al-Mu'taṣim's army, many of whom were non-Arab Muslims. Al-Mu'taṣim had been forced to move the caliphate to Sāmarrā' in 833 to avoid aggression against his Turkish guards. Saul's resentment can also be considered as enmity against the Turkish guards by the caliphs in Sāmarrā' for the guards were powerful and prevented them from returning to Baghdad. In either case, Saul's actions resemble those of the passing caliphate which could not control its own army.

The figure of David in al-Ṭabarī's narrative could have been understood as paralleling the caliphs in Baghdad after 892/278, who had managed to rein in the tyranny of the Turkish guards. David may also have been compared to the caliph al-Mu'taḍid who had close relations with the army and spent much of his reign in campaigns similar to David's early military success.⁷²⁰ David's popularity with the Israelites may be al-Ṭabarī's depiction of the rebirth of public confidence in the caliphs, at least until the reign of the Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908-32/295-320) who lived a life of extravagant luxury. David's fall from popularity resembles the caliphate's transformation from the regained strength of Caliph al-Mu'taḍid to the

⁷²⁰ Hugh Kennedy, "Al-Mu'taḍid bi-llāh, Abu'l 'Abbās Aḥmad b. Talḥa", in *ET*², volume 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 759.

decline that set in under the Caliph al-Muqtadir.⁷²¹ It was during the time of al-Muqtadir that the eastern side of Baghdād became the haven for the elite, and the centre of authority for the government of the city. Many new palaces and mosques were built in the area, part of a construction boom unheralded under previous caliphs. The high profiles of the elite and the extravagant lifestyles of the caliphs in Baghdād parallel the decline of David’s leadership. Al-Ṭabarī and other Baghdādī citizens may have secretly wished that someone could have prohibited al-Muqtadir’s extravagant construction schemes, in the same way in which God had proscribed David’s building the Temple.

5.5 Al-Tha‘labī’s David

5.5.1 The enmity of Goliath and David’s triumph

Al-Tha‘labī describes Goliath in great detail. Goliath alone is capable of defeating entire armies and even carries heavy metal balls each weighing three hundred pounds for use in battle.⁷²² In comparison, David is offered armour and weapons (by Saul) but he chooses to face Goliath armed only with a sling and three stones. Although King Saul protests, David advises Saul to let him fight as he knows best.⁷²³ David will protect the Israelites as he would the sheep he protects from wolves or lions.

The dialogue between Goliath and David in al-Tha‘labī’s narrative just before the battle begins also differs slightly from the dialogue in al-Ṭabarī’s narrative. They exchange verbal insults. Goliath says to him, “David you come like a

⁷²¹ K.V. Zettersteen and C.E. Bosworth, “al-Muqtadir bi-llāh, Abū’l-Faḍl Dja‘far”, 541.

⁷²² Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 271 / *Tales*, 456.

⁷²³ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 271 / *Tales*, 455.

dog carrying a stone,” to which David replies, “You are more evil than a dog”.⁷²⁴

The “dog” is a metaphor for enmity, a lack of civility and aggressive hatred against the enemy.

This deep hatred provokes the fight. David loses no time, placing three stones into his sling. With one shot he hits Goliath in the forehead, the force behind the shot making the stone pierce his brain and kill Goliath’s army of thirty men.⁷²⁵ Then David removes Goliath’s ring of kingship, beheads Goliath and delivers the head to King Saul. David’s brutality ends Goliath’s threat against the Israelites. Al-Tha^clabī uses the enmity between David and Goliath as an analogy to the historic battle of al-Badr when the army of early Muslims was outnumbered by their Meccan enemies.⁷²⁶ Clearly, al-Tha^clabī presents in his narrative a historical lesson which relates to the Prophet Muḥammad’s first triumph against his enemies. Al-Tha^clabī offers narrative advice: political rulers can learn from history that triumph does not rely on advanced weaponry, but in the power of faith on which the prophets relied.

Al-Tha^clabī paints a more vivid picture of the battle between Goliath and David. Although Goliath appears brutish and well armed, David is no less brutal in battle. His first reputation as a leader stems from his brutality against an enemy of the Israelites. In this way, al-Tha^clabī constructs a closer correlation in temperament between David and Goliath than does al-Ṭabarī. Unlike al-Ṭabarī’s David, whose inherent violence is first seen in his treatment of Uriah, al-Tha^clabī’s David shows the dark side of his character from the beginning. At the same time, the ruthlessness with which al-Tha^clabī’s David proceeds on the battlefield matches the expectations

⁷²⁴ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 271 / *Tales*, 456.

⁷²⁵ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 271 / *Tales*, 456.

⁷²⁶ Al-Tha^clabī, *‘Arā’is*, 272 / *Tales*, 456.

towards the type of ruler that late medieval theorists like Kay Kā'ūs held up as the ideal.

5.5.2 Enmity between Saul and David

The source of enmity in al-Tha'labī shifts from external relationships to family in the shape of his father-in-law, Saul. Al-Tha'labī's description of the hostility between David and Saul is marked by two unique details. First, when David triumphs over Goliath, Saul adds a further condition to his promise to grant David his daughter for marriage; Saul asks David to fight and kill all polytheists in the countryside: *wa fī jibalina a'ḍā' min al-mushrikīn*.⁷²⁷ David complies and delivers the beheaded skulls, chained together, to Saul. Beheading is a style of combat which symbolises complete victory over the enemy. Of necessity, David has developed his techniques of warfare early in his life, for a shepherd must protect his flock—techniques marked by precision and brutality. Saul notes well his courage and loyalty to the King. David represents a credible and courageous warrior desperately needed by the Israelites and Saul at that time. Saul realises that it is crucial that he meet his promises to David without further conditions. The real enmity Saul feels toward David develops once David becomes a member of Saul's household and grows in status from warrior to statesman/ political leader in the minds of the Israelites.

Al-Tha'labī adds a sign of this growing enmity (not found in al-Ṭabarī) taken from an account by Wahb b. Munabbih. Upon entering David's household, Saul heaves his staff which has a sharp metal-pointed edge, in David's direction;⁷²⁸ David quickly steps aside and the staff imbeds itself in the wall behind him. David

⁷²⁷ Al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is*, 272 / *Tales*, 457.

⁷²⁸ Al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is*, 272 / *Tales*, 457.

immediately realises Saul's murderous intent. The dialogue which follows shows that Saul expects David to forgive him as the Biblical Abel did towards Cain.⁷²⁹ David does forgive Saul but Saul's evil intention towards David continues.

Al-Tha'labī follows al-Ṭabarī's narrative very closely to show David's superior shrewdness over Saul. Though Saul schemes to kill David⁷³⁰, David, forewarned and ever vigilant, outwits Saul. The night Saul enters David's bed chamber, David places a wineskin full of wine under the bedclothes on the bed and lies beneath it. Saul attacks with his sword, striking the wineskin which he thinks is David's body. This attempt to kill David prompts him to retaliate. David enters the bedchamber of Saul and inserts four arrows (eight in al-Ṭabarī), one on each side of his body, one at his head and one at his feet.⁷³¹ Again the next night, David enters Saul's bedchamber while he is sleeping and cuts off a piece of his clothing and a lock of his hair— in addition he removes Saul's jar of water and his cup from beside his bed. There is no attempt at physical violence. David just wishes Saul to know he has been there and that he knows of Saul's plan to kill him. This has become a political game and David shows that he can outwit Saul, making the point that violence is not always an effective solution to enmity. Since David does not choose to kill Saul twice during his sleep, he shows that he is maturing in wisdom and leadership skills. David is thus emerging as a political leader rather than just an accomplished warrior.

However, still obsessed with his desire to kill David, Saul pursues David by horseback while he is alone in the forest.⁷³² Al-Tha'labī's story also tells of David

⁷²⁹ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 272-73 / *Tales*, 458.

⁷³⁰ A trust-worthy man whose nickname is *Two-eyed* (*dhu ʿaynain*), informs Saul's daughter, who is married to David, that her father intends to kill David. She in turn advises David to be cautious that night while sleeping. See Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 273 / *Tales*, 458.

⁷³¹ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 273 / *Tales*, 458.

⁷³² Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 273 / *Tales*, 459.

hiding in the cave to escape Saul. Yet again David does not take revenge nor does he take up arms against Saul. As David's popularity increases, Saul in a fury murders all the scholars among the Israelites who favour David's leadership.⁷³³

The resolution of this enmity between David and Saul starts as Saul begins to reflect on his wrongful actions against David and his supporters; this regret al-Tha^clabī attributes to God's interference in the drama of hostility; He (God) instils in Saul's heart a desire to repent and he seeks penance (*wa waḍa^ca fī qalb Ṭalūt al-tawba*).⁷³⁴ When Saul searches for a scholar to seek assurance of his forgiveness – only one woman-scholar is left among the Israelites.⁷³⁵ He is directed by her to visit the tomb of the prophet Samuel, who summons him to a life of self-sacrifice.⁷³⁶ Saul's penance is to become a militant *jihādī* along with his son in the service of God (*fī sabīl allāh*) against polytheists.⁷³⁷ Saul's previous demand of David to fight the polytheists has now become Saul's penance. He must become a warrior in David's *jihād*. Saul's martyrdom elevates him from an unpopular king to a Muslim of great esteem, as a martyr for God. Al-Tha^clabī offers faith through *jihād* as an alternative to the violence of unjust killing. It is hardly surprising that al-Tha^clabī, as a religious Muslim, takes his readers to such a resolution.

How does Saul's story relate to al-Tha^clabī's time? The figure of Saul finds an analogy in the transition of power from the dynasty of the Sāmānids to the Turkish dynasty of the Ghaznavids, both of whom were culturally Persian. As

⁷³³ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 273 / *Tales*, 459. See also al-Ṭabarī, *al-Ta'rikh*, volume 1, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 137.

⁷³⁴ Al-Ṭabarī does not attribute to God the lamentation of Ṭalūt's plea of forgiveness. See al-Ṭabarī's *al-Ta'rikh*, 279 / *History*, volume 3, 137.

⁷³⁵ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 274 / *Tales*, 460.

⁷³⁶ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 274 / *Tales*, 461.

⁷³⁷ Al-Tha^clabī, *Arā'is*, 274 / *Tales*, 461. In contrast to the narrative of al-Ṭabarī, Saul is asked to relinquish his kingdom and fight as a *jihādī*. See al-Ṭabarī, *al-Ta'rikh*, 280 / *History*, 139.

mentioned in Chapter Two, the Sāmānids⁷³⁸ converted many Turkish slaves in the army to ensure fidelity to the king. This fidelity lasted for almost the entire tenth century, and as the army grew in power through their influence they brought the eastern side of the empire into Sunnī Islam.

It is likely that in the minds of al-Tha^clabī's audience in eleventh-century Khurāsān, David symbolises the rise to power of the Ghaznavids after the fading of the Sāmānids. David is a warrior in the narrative, his background as a shepherd as obscure as the Turkish slaves in the Sāmānid army from whom the later Ghaznavids derived.⁷³⁹ At the same time, David's brutality in destroying the polytheists in al-Tha^clabī parallels the brutality shown by the Ghaznavids in quelling any religious threats (such as the Karrāmites who acted as usurpers) to their region.⁷⁴⁰ Overall the enmity between Saul and David reflects the tension between the fading Sāmānids and the rising Ghaznavids mentioned above.

5.5.3 David as his own enemy

David's lament for his sins against Uriah and Bathsheba does not make him a martyr or a *jihādī* like Saul. His lament includes self- recognition of the enmity that resides in him.⁷⁴¹ The enemy is no longer a family member but the enmity has its seed in his heart. David's pride and lust become his enemies. He is now the sovereign king of the Israelites, with a kingdom free from outside hostility. His

⁷³⁸ The Sāmānids were strongly Sunnī-oriented. See C.E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, 195. See also Amīr Ḥasan Siddiqī, "Caliphate and kingship in medieval Persia", *Islamic Culture*, volumes 9-11, 1935-1937; reprinted by Porcupine Press Inc, 1977, 31.

⁷³⁹ W. Barthold and Cl. Cahen, "Alp Tigin", in *ET*, volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 421.

⁷⁴⁰ Bulliet, "The political-religious history of Nishāpūr in the eleventh century", 77.

⁷⁴¹ There is a *ḥadīth* quote which says that "the worst enemy you have is [*al-nafs*] between your sides [chest]". See Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma^c fi^t-taṣawwuf*, edited by Reynold A. Nicholson, Gibb memorial Series (London: Luzac, 1914), no. 22, 12.

ambition to be more than he is, a leader equal to his ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob leads him to fall below the expectation of his people and of God.

David's downfall begins with his request to be tested by God. During the trial he plans to murder Uriah – a man who is not an enemy but loyal commander. David risks his friendship with God by what he has done with Uriah.⁷⁴² He violates the innocence of others – Uriah and Bathsheba. David's real enemy is himself and his weakness makes him closer in character to Goliath and Saul than to his prophetic ancestry. Ideally, he should be ranked in the list of his enemies: Goliath and Saul. But al-Tha^ʿlabī does not list him among these two because of his respect of prophets. David remains in the eyes of God a prophet, but his tragedy as a king is becoming his own enemy.

The sin which David commits is all that much greater since he has been divinely chosen as a prophet. A prophet is supposed to show mercy to others and listens to God's counsel. Al-Tha^ʿlabī does not shy away from this significant fact (al-Ṭabarī emphasizes it as well). God has expectations from his prophets, and therefore sins of the prophets, even minor ones, are enormous in the eyes of God (*fa ʿātabahu Allāh ʿala dhālika, li anna dhunūb al-anbiyāʾ wa in ṣaghirat fa hiya ʿaḍīmat ʿind Allāh*).⁷⁴³ David thus alienates himself from God as becomes evident in his long prayer of lamentation.⁷⁴⁴

⁷⁴² Al-Tha^ʿlabī alludes to this friendship with God will never be as close as before. See *ʿArāʾis*, 463-464 / *Tales*, 276. Even after God forgives David, He tells his prophet that the condition and closeness between them has altered for ever: “*wa lakin irtafaʿat al-ḥalat allatī baynī wa baynak min al-wawūd wa-l qurub falan tadrukuha abadan.*”

⁷⁴³ Al-Tha^ʿlabī, *Tales*, 472 / *ʿArāʾis*, 282.

⁷⁴⁴ Al-Tha^ʿlabī, *Tales*, 474 / *ʿArāʾis*, 282.

David recognizes the extent of his alienation and cries: “O Lord, how can I look at You on the Day of Resurrection?”⁷⁴⁵ David fears that his alienation to God may last for all eternity, continuing on the Day of Resurrection, but he continues to plead with God for forgiveness. The weight of his sin is crystallized in his lamentation when he says, “O Lord, You commissioned me to be a merciful father to the orphan and an affectionate husband to the widow, yet I forgot your covenant.”⁷⁴⁶ He failed God as a prophet with a mission. His sense of alienation becomes acute and he prays to God, “O Lord, even the birds know how to praise You and I, the sinful weak servant, did not follow Your advice.”⁷⁴⁷ David feels inferior even to the birds that he feels surpass him in God’s eyes. Al-Tha^clabī’s David cannot tolerate what he has become. He wishes to be as great as his ancestors but he falls below the lower creatures like birds.

But the lamentation reveals something greater than his guilt, his moral conscience. David knows that his secret intentions toward Uriah and Bathsheba are known to God. David is unable to defend himself before God as he becomes conscious of his moral error and begins to lament his sins. David embodies the Qur^ʿānic sense that those who plan malice against others, thinking that they won’t be discovered, cheat themselves.⁷⁴⁸

Through the lament of David al-Tha^clabī is sending an important message to rulers of his time. Even though secrets are essential for their survival in the political arena, secrets which are immoral cannot be hidden from God. One is always vulnerable before God who knows all secrets. Leaders must have pure secrets in

⁷⁴⁵ Al-Tha^clabī, *Tales*, 474 / *ʿArāʾis*, 283.

⁷⁴⁶ Al-Tha^clabī, *Tales*, 474 / *ʿArāʾis*, 283.

⁷⁴⁷ Al-Tha^clabī, *Tales*, 474 / *ʿArāʾis*, 283.

⁷⁴⁸ Cf., Q 2: 7-14.

order to gain more credibility to protect the citizens of his kingdom and lead with justice and compassion. Al-Thaʿlabī is calling for holiness as part of the integrity of political Muslim leaders, the *imām* type.

5.6 Al-Ṭabarī's Solomon

5.6.1 Solomon and enmity

Solomon is a great ruler but he is also a man of the desert or wilderness; it is his playing field for territorial expansion. Solomon promotes Islamic hegemony over other kingdoms, which must succumb to him and to his faith. This is the case with the Kingdoms of Sheba and Sidon (an island kingdom). It is the means by which he conducts his military campaigns in these two cases which show the two sides of Solomon, one hostile and one diplomatic. He destroys Sidon and marries the dead king's daughter, thus exposing himself to her enmity. Solomon is ruthless in his exercise of power over his own followers, the jinn, demons and slaves; he has the ability to communicate effectively with all God's creatures, as mentioned in an earlier chapter. In the narrative, enmity toward Solomon emanates from Bilqīs, Jarādah and Ṣakhr.

5.6.2 The enmity of Bilqīs

Queen Bilqīs of Sheba challenges Solomon on several levels. She is a woman of enormous temporal authority,⁷⁴⁹ a polytheist and a worshipper of the Sun.⁷⁵⁰ In this case she is also inquisitive and wishes to question Solomon's declaration of prophetic status after she receives his *kitāb karīm* requesting that she surrender her

⁷⁴⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 158.

⁷⁵⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 158.

kingdom to him without resistance.⁷⁵¹ She assesses Solomon's claim to rule by sending him gifts and asking him pertinent questions to see if he is indeed a man of God. Her reaction to his *kitāb karīm* is the first sign of her enmity toward him:

If he [Solomon] accepts it [gift], then he is an earthly king, and I am more powerful and stronger than he. But if he does not accept it, then this is something from God.⁷⁵²

We can infer two things from these words: first, she is not interested in a diplomatic relationship with another temporal king, and second, if he is of God and rejects her gifts she is open to his proposal. If Solomon is just another king, then she has a greater army and can overcome him. If, however, he is a religious leader she is willing to negotiate a truce. Why is Bilqīs interested in a new religion?

Bilqīs seems to know something of the Islamic God, when she says upon reading the noble letter, "This is something of God."⁷⁵³ She may worship the Sun, but she is not totally ignorant of God. She does not realize however that God has prophets. The overtures of God through his prophets intrigue her. Al-Ṭabarī does not state that Bilqīs is dissatisfied with her worship of the Sun, but perhaps the *kitāb karīm* with its words from the Qurʾān can offer her something that the Sun-god cannot. By having Solomon use these words in the *kitāb*, al-Ṭabarī seems to suggest that words from the Qurʾān should be the first introduction to Islam.

After her gifts to Solomon are returned, Bilqīs realises she can no longer ignore Solomon, so she approaches him and encamps with her army not too far from Solomon.⁷⁵⁴ Her throne she leaves behind in Sheba. When she meets with Solomon

⁷⁵¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 158.

⁷⁵² Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 159.

⁷⁵³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 158.

⁷⁵⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 290 / *History*, volume 3, 158.

she discovers that the demons have stolen her throne and it sits before Solomon.⁷⁵⁵

This gesture is a political game of power on behalf of Solomon, symbolizing the logic of surrender of her dominion to his authority. It is also a contributing factor to elicit her sincerity in embracing his faith. Solomon then answers her questions (see Chapter Four) and she recognizes him as a man of God worthy of her attention, even sharing his religion. She is also a shrewd leader who knows that if she accepts Islam as the religion for her and her dominion, enmity between her and Solomon shall cease.

What does this narrative mean for al-Ṭabarī's time? Al-Ṭabarī tries in his narrative to convey that there is an alternative to the use of military force to win new converts. Al-Ṭabarī's alternative is diplomacy – sending a *noble letter* - and sharing the words of the Qurʾān can dissipate enmity and quell any apprehension among state-leaders; in the story of Bilqīs, she discovers Solomon's Muslim faith worthy of emulation and consequently she converts to the same faith.

5.6.3 The daughter of the king of Sidon or Jarādah

The enmity of Jarādah is in sharp contrast to that of Bilqīs. Al-Ṭabarī never really names “Jarādah” as the daughter of the deposed King of Sidon. However she survives because of her beauty and is forced by Solomon to embrace Islam. She reluctantly embraces the faith: “So he chose her for himself and called her to embrace Islam and so she did without conviction and self confidence, and he loved her most among all his women.”⁷⁵⁶ Shortly after her marriage, Jarādah becomes nostalgic about her deceased father and her home. Her sadness for her father prompts

⁷⁵⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 291 / *History*, volume 3, 159.

⁷⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 293 / *History*, volume 3, 166.

Solomon, who loves her dearly, to have a statue of her father created by the demons in order to boost her morale. Solomon tries to console her, “God has replaced his [her father’s] dominion with a greater one, a rulership greater than his and has guided you to Islam which is best among all.”⁷⁵⁷ Al-Ṭabarī projects the significance of Islam as the “best among all” in order to show to the reader the coming difficulty that Jarādah has with the new faith. For the daughter of the deposed king of Sidon, Islam is a constant reminder of what she lost: her father and his kingdom where she has known happiness. However, instead of worshipping God she secretly worships at the statue of her father each morning and evening. She practises idolatry. She is seen by one of Solomon’s senior advisors (Āsif) who, in his farewell public speech praising all prophets, shortens his praise for Solomon’s prophetic adult years stating that Jarādah is practising idolatry inside his home. Solomon reacts immediately, punishing Jarādah,⁷⁵⁸ and thereafter performs a ritual of penance. Intolerance against idolatry is one main issue, but it is not the only one.

The situation about the daughter of king of Sidon in the minds of al-Ṭabarī’s readers in his time may correspond to historical event of conquering the island of Sicily from the Byzantines during the ninth century,⁷⁵⁹ at a time when the Christians were considered by Muslims as the idol worshippers. For al-Ṭabarī this incident might be considered as a good thing and the use of military *jihād* definitely expanded the regional territories of Islam; but would the military triumph necessarily result in genuine conversion? This is another issue embedded in the narrative. It seems that al-Ṭabarī might have preferred the diplomacy option because it has a more favourable

⁷⁵⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 293 / *History*, volume 3, 166.

⁷⁵⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 294 / *History*, volume 3, 167. The punishment is not specified in this narrative, probably that Jarādah is banished from Solomon’s palace and statue of Jarādah’s father is destroyed.

⁷⁵⁹ Hodgson, *The venture*, volume 1, 312.

result about conversion to Islamic faith with conviction (Bilqīs) than forced conversion (Jarādah). Forced conversion has the consequence of compromising Islam as a religion of pious appearance than a whole heart submission to God.

Al-Ṭabarī is sending a warning advice to the rulers in Baghdād with respect to other non-Muslim rulers. An act of hostility neither brings out genuine conversion nor overcomes underground idolatry. The way to get rid of idolatry is having conviction in the Islamic message. Diplomacy, combined with the sharing of Qurʾānic wisdom (*kitāb karīm*), such as that which occurred between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is far more effective. It is no surprise that al-Ṭabarī chooses diplomacy given that he lived most of his life in urban settings across the Islamic empire (Āmul, Rayy, Kūfa, Baṣra, Cairo and Baghdād). He was not a Bedouin but he knew of the raids in the desert against some caravans to destabilise the empire and the network of tribes.⁷⁶⁰

5.6.4 Ṣakhr

Ṣakhr⁷⁶¹ (“rock” in Arabic) is a companion of the sea and a *shayṭān*. He is someone like an archetypical usurper, who appears friendly enough to be close to the

⁷⁶⁰ In the pre-Islamic period, raids or *ghazws* targeted outside groups (tribes) which were related in kinship or alliance. In early Islam the *ghazw* became a Muslim praxis specifically against idolaters or polytheists in order to expand the Islamic hegemony. See R. Firestone, *Jihād. The origin of Holy War in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34.

⁷⁶¹ The general reference to the devil in Islamic writing is either *shayṭān* or more specifically Iblīs (chief devil). See Andrew Rippin, “Devil”, in *EQ*, volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 524; and *idem*, “Shayṭān”, in *ET*, volume 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 406. See also A.J. Wensinck and L. Gardet, “Iblīs”, in *ET*, volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 668. In popular folktales, the reference to Ṣakhr appears in the tales from *The Thousand and One Nights* as the *Jinni* who mutinied King Solomon; see the translation by N.J. Dawood of *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* (London: Book Club Associates, 1954), 82. In the several versions of the epic of Gilgamesh or Bulūqiya (in Arabic) in the *Arabian Nights* have repeatedly mentioned Ṣakhr as the demon king; in one account he is even the immortal demon, and has conversed with Bulūqiya about the creation of the world. See Stephanie Dalley, “Gilgamesh in the Arabian Nights”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, volume 1, No. 1 (April 1991): 5-7, 10-11. It also seems from al-Thaʿlabī’s narrative of Solomon that Ṣakhr may be a reference to his fate imprisoned inside a box made from rock before he is thrown to the sea as

ruler but has malicious intention to cause havoc and overthrow a Muslim ruler. He impersonates Solomon by stealing his ring while he is engaged in the rituals of purity.⁷⁶² Şakhr tricks Amīna, the person to whom Solomon has entrusted his ring. She hands Şakhr the ring to Solomon's dominion thinking he is the real Solomon. Once Şakhr places the ring on his finger, the real Solomon becomes unrecognizable to his people and to Amīna. He is dethroned for forty days and he hires himself out to work as a fisherman at the sea coast fish market. He drops in social status from a ruler king to a despised labourer in a fish-market, where he is badly treated by his employer. He experiences enmity from almost everyone he encounters.

However, Şakhr does not remain long on the throne because he does not have the same social and religious concern for his people as Solomon. Şakhr desecrates certain Islamic rituals. Solomon's wives suffer because Şakhr makes contact with them during their menstrual time⁷⁶³ without proper rituals of purity. He embodies none of the Islamic ideal.

Once the truth is disclosed about Şakhr, he flees to the sea where he throws the ring of the dominion into the waves in an attempt to keep Solomon off the throne. One fish in the sea swallows the ring and this same fish is caught and given, by fate, to Solomon while working at the fish market.⁷⁶⁴ When he opens the fish, Solomon discovers his ring and puts it back on his finger. He is immediately recognized as the true Solomon the prophet leader and regains his throne.

commanded by Solomon. Al-Thaʿlabī also mentions him in his version story of the Bulūqiya; see the Arabic text of *ʿArāʾīs*, 354.

⁷⁶² Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 294 / *History*, volume 3, 167.

⁷⁶³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 294 / *History*, volume 3, 170.

⁷⁶⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, volume 1, 294 / *History*, volume 3, 170.

5.7 Al-Tha‘labī’s Solomon

5.7.1 Raids and dominions

Al-Tha‘labī’s Solomon has the same enemies as al-Ṭabarī’s Solomon: Bilqīs, Jarādah and Ṣakhr – none of Muslim origin. Al-Tha‘labī likens King Solomon’s expanded territories to the larger historical dominions of Alexander the Great, Nimrod and Nebuchadnezzar.⁷⁶⁵ Solomon had a great dominion, thanks to his incursions into non-Muslim territories.⁷⁶⁶ Al-Tha‘labī explains that Solomon’s raids start after he builds the Temple, presumably in Jerusalem. These raids are of a particularly violent nature, contrary to the real understanding of *ghazw*, the military code of the Bedouin tribes; this protocol limits the raids to acquiring wealth, particularly animals such as camels as opposed to killing or annihilating an existing community.⁷⁶⁷ However, as mentioned earlier in al-Ṭabarī’s Solomon, Muslims raided polytheist regions for the purpose of conquering the area for Islam. The shedding of blood exceeds the Bedouin purpose of wealth accumulation. Solomon’s raid on the monarchy of Sidon and the killing of its king and his subjects (except for his daughter, Jarādah) represent for al-Tha‘labī a Khurāsānī type of attack⁷⁶⁸ rather than a Bedouin raid. Solomon apparently knows the value of diplomacy but he does not use it here. In fact, Solomon uses diplomacy only once (sending the *kitāb karīm*), in negotiations with the Queen of Sheba, Bilqīs.

⁷⁶⁵ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 292 / *Tales*, 490-91.

⁷⁶⁶ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 293 / *Tales*, 491.

⁷⁶⁷ T.M. Johnstone, “Ghazw” in *ET*, volume 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 1055. See Marshall G.S. Hodgson *The venture*, volume 1, 151. Hodgson points out that in the tribal system at the time of the Prophet, the wealthier tribes were targeted to acquire their highly valued camels, beasts of burden capable of bearing the heat and needing little water when crossing the desert.

⁷⁶⁸ A monarchy attacking another monarchy is more brutal than a tribe’s *ghazw* against a passing caravan in the desert. This is because the destruction is more extensive and the goal is to control absolutely the territory of the attack.

5.7.2 The enmity of Bilqīs

As discussed in an earlier chapter, Yaʿfūr (his hoopoe bird) informs Solomon about the kingdom of Sheba, ruled by a woman with vast authority. The diplomacy which is instituted by Solomon and Yaʿfūr suggests that Bilqīs is perceived with some enmity. Knowing how great her kingdom is, Solomon may face his match. After all, she is half a *jinnī*,⁷⁶⁹ a genealogical background suggesting a person of superior skills. Instead of raiding her kingdom, Solomon delivers a diplomatic letter to her via the hoopoe. It contains several Qurʾānic verses and a message to submit to him because her surrender to his authority is decreed by divine revelation.⁷⁷⁰ Solomon sees Bilqīs as a potential convert to Islam. His letter serves as a *jihād* in the political diplomacy of spreading Islam.

Bilqīs is an intelligent woman who takes the initiative in situations which will benefit her and her people. For example, in al-Thaʿlabī's narrative she kills her tyrant king-husband⁷⁷¹ on their wedding night to deliver her people from his oppression.⁷⁷² Becoming the Queen of all Yemen, she consolidates her army gaining the loyalty of thousands of soldiers under her command. Her army, unlike the army of Solomon, does not include demons or jinn and she is incapable of communicating with creatures other than humans. Upon receiving his sealed royal letter she does not immediately proclaim herself stronger than Solomon (as she does in al-Ṭabarī's narrative).⁷⁷³ Solomon's royal seal frightens her because it manifests his unusual

⁷⁶⁹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 313 / *Tales*, 523.

⁷⁷⁰ Q 27: 29-31.

⁷⁷¹ This is not available in al-Ṭabarī's narrative.

⁷⁷² Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 313 / *Tales*, 524.

⁷⁷³ Bilqīs intuitively feels Solomon's kingdom greater than hers. See Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 315 / *Tales*, 526.

status.⁷⁷⁴ She therefore decides to put his unusual status to a test and sends him gifts to assess his response. Solomon returns her gifts, a sign that he is no leader lured by valuable gifts, so she decides to meet him directly and ask him some pertinent questions regarding his God. She goes to meet Solomon, her army in attendance.

Al-Tha^clabī equates this journey with the journey to the Arabian tribes who gave allegiance to the prophet Muḥammad in the seventh century, embracing Islam as the official religion for their tribes⁷⁷⁵ in order to encourage unity among all the Arabian tribes.

Al-Tha^clabī suggests that Bilqīs' visit is more than just an inquisitive one, rather it is an act of surrender to Solomon: "If he is a prophet he won't accept the gift and won't be happy with us except to follow his religious faith"⁷⁷⁶ (Al-Ṭabarī does not make this association). Al-Tha^clabī intends to show that the growth of Islam has a political dimension. The lesson implied in Bilqīs' submission to Solomon is that one Muslim kingdom should not raise its sword against another kingdom willing to convert peacefully. Further, *Jihād* must never be carried out against another Muslim.⁷⁷⁷ Diplomatic initiative leads to political harmony and peace from which the leaders of both places can derive benefits not just economically but socially and which will extend to all social classes⁷⁷⁸ within the affected areas.

Queen Bilqīs' eventual conversion to the new faith has political ramifications inspired by the Qur^ʾānic verses which Solomon shares with the Queen. As she comes to Solomon, her surrender is already symbolized by her throne at Solomon's feet.

⁷⁷⁴ Al-Tha^clabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 315 / *Tales*, 526.

⁷⁷⁵ See the *Sūra al-ḥujūrāt* (Q 49:14-17). The authentic conversion to Islam is a major theme in this *Sūra*.

⁷⁷⁶ Al-Tha^clabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 316 / *Tales*, 527.

⁷⁷⁷ E. Tyan, "Djihād" in *EF*, volume 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 538.

⁷⁷⁸ The conversion of a leader, in this case a queen, leads all her kingdom to the new faith.

Her arrival completes the formality. Second, her conversion from worshipping the Sun to the One God gives credibility to the *jihād* of political diplomacy to promote harmony among kingdoms. It is a story where a friendship emerges from an enmity (this is Kay Kā'ūs' idea as well).

However, al-Tha'labī uses this personal encounter between the king and the queen for another purpose (not found in al-Ṭabarī). Although she comes to test Solomon, Solomon also wishes to assess her mental maturity and honesty⁷⁷⁹ and to see how she will react when she finds her throne in his possession. When she does not deny that the throne is truly hers and does not overreact upon seeing it, Solomon realizes the Queen's true intention, which is to seek out the truth of his prophetic authority. This encounter dissipates all the presumed enmity between Solomon and Bilqīs.

5.7.3 The enmity of Jarādah

Enmity comes in the form of a beautiful woman. After Solomon kills King Sidon and destroys his island-kingdom, he spares Sidon's daughter because of her beauty and marries her. He offers her Islam as the new religion and she reluctantly embraces it, out of fear rather than conviction. The quality of her conversion substantially differs from that of Bilqīs. This is because Solomon approaches Jarādah quite differently; she is a prisoner of war who has lost her entire family. In comparison, Bilqīs embraces Islam as a Queen with authority over the vast territory of Yemen. Bilqīs is not obliged to embrace Islam, but does so from conviction once she has tested Solomon's religious authority. Jarādah's first impression of Solomon

⁷⁷⁹ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 319-20 / *Tales*, 534.

is negative— he has destroyed her father’s kingdom and her family – and it resonates with Queen Bīlqīs’ negative perception of kings who destroy regions which they invade. This represents a contrast between the *jihād* of diplomacy and the militant aggression of raids.

Even though Jarādah embraces Islam, and is given the security of marriage, the enmity she bears against him for destroying her family makes her a sad queen. In al-Thaʿlabī’s eyes Solomon has failed to properly promote Islam. There has been no diplomatic approach to Sidon and its ruler, just aggression and hostility. Al-Thaʿlabī appreciates the Ṣūfī manner of promoting Islam (*jihād* of the heart and of the tongue)⁷⁸⁰ more than the brutish military style of raids. If al-Thaʿlabī’s Islam is to be the conquering religion, it does not have to be achieved by the use of an army. The story of Jarādah nicely fits al-Thaʿlabī’s lesson that an authentic conversion is best not forced by violence.

Al-Thaʿlabī, in his story of Jarādah’s worship of her father’s statue follows the narrative of al-Ṭabarī closely, telling of her discovery and punishment by Solomon and Solomon’s subsequent punishment and penance.⁷⁸¹ However, al-Thaʿlabī adds a prayer of penance – not of the same depth and length as David’s penitential prayer – to affirm that all David’s household is to worship One God: “Lord, it was not fitting for the family of David to worship other than You, or to establish in their houses and their households worship other than for You.”⁷⁸² In penance Solomon pledges the commitment of the house of David to the One God, for

⁷⁸⁰ *Jihād* remains the fight for the path of God (*fī sabīl al-lāh*) either by military or peaceful means. The non-militant approach is purging the heart from sinful inclination and promoting speech, to pursue the ideal good of Islam and shun what is evil. See R. Firestone, *Jihād*, 17.

⁷⁸¹ Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 323 / *Tales*, 539.

⁷⁸² Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 323 / *Tales*, 539.

he realises that despite his great power and control over others he has been unable to keep the worship of idolatry from his household.

5.7.4 The enmity of Ṣakhr

The Nīshāpūran author follows a similar storyline to al-Ṭabarī's in revealing the enmity of the devil, Ṣakhr. The punitive consequence of having idolatry performed in his household costs Solomon his reign for forty days. Ṣakhr, a devil, creates an illusion among Solomon's people that he is actually Solomon. The loss of Solomon's reign is symbolized by the loss of his ring to the devil. Al-Tha'labī adds a religious significance to the ring, stating that it had been given previously to Solomon by the angel Gabriel and that it is carved with an inscription of the *Shahāda*, an indication of the Muslim characteristic of the ruler.⁷⁸³ It does not take long before the people begin to realise that Solomon's values seem to have changed greatly, particularly when it comes to the non-observance of the rituals of purity, and the meting out of judgement to his people in matters of law.

Al-Tha'labī offers additional details about exposing Ṣakhr (not found in al-Ṭabarī). The scholars of Israel visited Ṣakhr and in his presence they read the Torah⁷⁸⁴ to gain insight into the wrongful observances he has practised. This causes him to flee and he throws Solomon's ring into the sea where secrets are kept hidden. Ṣakhr is not a virtuous leader who can sustain disclosure of his misdeeds. In fact, Ṣakhr is not a leader with enough of a religious conscience to perform a ritual of genuine penance.

⁷⁸³ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 323 / *Tales*, 539.

⁷⁸⁴ Al-Tha'labī, *ʿArāʾis*, 324 / *Tales*, 542.

Al-Tha^clabī also offers the reader another reason for Solomon's punishment—he has married Jarādah, a non-Israelite.⁷⁸⁵ This does not seem to be a strong reason given the sensibility of al-Tha^clabī to Shī^cī and Jewish-Christian sources of his narrative, but it provides another perspective to the story of Jarādah, for it explains her attachment to idolatry; she knows no other worship. She could not be a genuine Muslim because she has experienced what a prophet of God has done to her father's kingdom. Yet the narrative introduces another idea, namely, that when a prophet marries a non-believer it affects his reputation as a prophet.

One can gather from the accounts of al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha^clabī that they are both critical of hostile raids into new territories as means to expand the hegemony of Islam. Both authors distinguish between Islamic governance and Islamic conversion. Islamic governance can be forced upon a people, but Islamic conversion cannot and is subject only to conviction. They believe that conversion to the Islamic faith can be achieved without the use of violence. The treatment of the enemy is crucial in this regard.

5.8 Contextual issues: centre and edge

The story of Solomon has great significance for the leaders of al-Ṭabarī's time both in the city of Baghdād and in the larger territories of the empire. The historical period of this author was charged with enmity rather than being characterized by peace.

The caliphs in Baghdād were no longer capable of managing the vast empire over which they were supposed to have total political authority. The narrative figure

⁷⁸⁵ Al-Tha^clabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 325 / *Tales*, 543.

of Ṣakhr, the archetypical usurper, may have evoked in the minds of al-Ṭabarī's audience the great challengers to the caliphate in the early tenth century, namely, the Fāṭimid caliph al-Mahdī (r.906-34/293-322)⁷⁸⁶ in North Africa and the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III (r. 912-16/299-303) in al-Andalus.⁷⁸⁷ Both, in the view of the centre, assumed the insignia of the caliphate and forced the legitimate caliph in Baghdād into a position of weakness and passivity.

However, such a threat was not only from distant places, because there were dangerous attempts within the court in Baghdād to undermine the legitimacy of the caliph. The story of Ṣakhr may have resonated with those in Baghdād who had dealings with Ibn al-Furāt. The Banū al-Furāt were a family of merchants and had considerable influence in the caliphal court where they had tension with another family, the Banū al-Jarrāḥ who had close ties with the military and tax collection.⁷⁸⁸ These two competing families were influential during the reign of Caliph al-Muqtadir. Ibn al-Furāt was a Shīʿī who was named vizier on three separate occasions under the Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908-932/295-320), having come to power as a boy. Ibn al-Furāt was a court-usurper who wanted to take over the political power of the caliph. He had an extravagant lifestyle, wielded considerable strength while in power and was quite disliked by those close to the caliph. He was vengeful and in his third vizierate, sought vengeance against those who sought to harm him during his earlier terms.⁷⁸⁹ His intention in civil duty was to accumulate as much wealth as he could and to maintain a high standard of living. His vengeful attitude caused the high officials in the caliph's court great consternation and they convinced the caliph to

⁷⁸⁶ Hodgson, *The venture*, volume 1, 491-92.

⁷⁸⁷ Hodgson, *The venture*, volume 1, 309.

⁷⁸⁸ Mårtensson, "Ṭabarī", 45.

⁷⁸⁹ Dominique Sourdel, "Ibn al-Furāt", in *ET*², volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 767.

arrest him in 924/311 (the same year the Qarmatian Shī'is attacked a pilgrimage caravan coming from Mecca).⁷⁹⁰

Not too far from the city of Baghdād, the revolution of the Zanj (869-883/255-269),⁷⁹¹ mentioned earlier, became a major threat to the political sovereignty of the caliph. These slaves were ill-treated, driven away from their lands of origin (like Jarādah's people) and lived a life of utter misery with little food provided for their sustenance. They were forced into Islam in order to survive. Such treatment of fellow Muslims does not represent proper *jihād* to promote Islam. It is no wonder that some slaves became rebels like Ṣakhr because of the ill-treatment they received. Ṣakhr may represent 'Alī b. Muḥammad, the leader of the slaves who opposed the leadership in Baghdād and had some political connection. Eventually the revolution was crushed by the forces of the caliph.

Al-Tha'labī in the tenth to the eleventh century Khurāsān also experienced a leadership rife with enmity internally and externally. During this period of time there

⁷⁹⁰ Sourdel, "Ibn al-Furāt", 767.

⁷⁹¹ There were three slave-led revolutions in Iraq: 689-90/69-70; 694/74; 868-93/254-279. The first two were during the Umayyad dynasty and proved unsuccessful. Most of the slaves were Africans from the Zanzibar region taken as captives during Muslim-Arab trades in Africa. They were located in the southern part of Iraq to cultivate the land, including the Baṣran region of al-Shaṭ al-'Arab. The dismal conditions of slavery were inhumanly harsh. The biggest and the longest revolution (fifteen years) was during the 'Abbāsid dynasty, and it was led by 'Alī b. Muḥammad who was a poet-intellectual with political connections close to the caliphate courts; his origin is obscure but he must have had the skill to organise a major revolutionary movement on behalf of the slaves against the ruling caliphs. 'Alī followed a pro-Kharījī egalitarian creed. See Bernard Lewis, "'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Zandjī, known as al-ṣāhib al-zandj", in *ET*, volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 388. Initially the caliphs were not too concerned about this revolution because they had more urgent priorities to attend to, given the state of anarchy seeping into the central power of the caliphate and in the wider regions of the empire. The initial phase of the third revolution was quite successful for about ten years and it actually managed to create a state within a state with its own coinage and with al-Mukhtāra as its capital. But under the regent al-Muwaffaq, crushing the Zanj revolution became a priority and after besieging the revolutionary areas he systematically crushed the slaves. See A. Popovic and G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, "al-Zanj", in *ET*, volume 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 444. It seems that 'Alī b. Muḥammad's intention was to create an independent political region for the Muslim-slaves, relatively close to Baghdād.

had been a shift in dynasties from the Persian Sāmānids⁷⁹² to the Turkish Ghaznavids – who were advocates for Sunnī Islam. The whole area of Khurāsān was rife for division and military activities contributing to the fall of the Sāmānids. Since Şakhr is a metaphor of instability and injustice, a reader of the *‘Arā’is* can see a number of historical incidences relating to him. For example, the Qarakhānids who were tribal groups in the north of the Oxus River and were a threat to the Ghaznavids under Maḥmūd. Initially, under Maḥmūd, the Qarakhānids were close to the Sulṭān because he married the daughter of the Qarakhāndī commander Ilig Naşr Khān(d. 1013/403) in 1000/389. There was an agreement between the Qarakhānids and the Ghaznavids about territorial control but the Qarakhānids did not want to stay in the land to the north of the Oxus River.⁷⁹³ However, this agreement did not last long because while Maḥmūd was in military expedition in Multān (India), the Qarakhānid army moved in and occupied the cities of Balkh and Nīshāpūr in 1006/396. This was rather a major threat to the Rule of Maḥmūd who took immediate action to recapture the two cities.⁷⁹⁴

However, one can also see Maḥmūd’s son, Mas‘ūd, as Şakhr in terms of the abuse he inflicted on those close to him and on the Shī‘īs. For example, in 1033/424, shortly after al-Tha‘labī’s death, Sulṭān Mas‘ūd⁷⁹⁵ (d.1040/431) sent his army commander, Tāsh Farrāsh (d. 1035/426), there and his brutality caused the Daylami citizens to pray for deliverance from such oppressions.⁷⁹⁶ Like Şakhr in the

⁷⁹² The Sāmānids were Sunnīs under the influence of the Ḥanafīs. Though there were occasional contacts between the Sāmānid ruler, Naşr b. Aḥmad, and the Ismā‘ilī Shī‘īs, the Sāmānids remained Sunnīs. See *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 4, 153.

⁷⁹³ *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 4, 171.

⁷⁹⁴ C.E. Bosworth, “The Illek-khāns or Qarakhānids” in *EF*, volume 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 1113.

⁷⁹⁵ This Mas‘ūd (d.1040/431) was the son of Maḥmūd of Ghazna who died in 1030/421. See *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 4, 187.

⁷⁹⁶ *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 4, 181.

narrative, Mas'ūd could not establish roots in the western provinces of Persia because of his lack of justice and fairness.

The readers of the *‘Arā’is* could possibly see a reference to Maḥmūd’s court in al-Tha‘labī’s description of those who read the Torah⁷⁹⁷ in the presence of Ṣakhr during the summit of his injustice. The Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghazna surrounded himself with intellectuals, like Bīrūnī and poets in his courts. Though he did not intentionally persecute them, there were incidences that some were not well treated or even well recognised. The famous poet al-Firdawsī⁷⁹⁸ whose epic *Shāh-nāma* includes panegyric verses for Maḥmūd, was not warmly recognised by the Sulṭān who under-paid him compared to the handsome rewards the Sulṭān gave other poets. Maḥmūd was not kind to the Shī‘ī intellectuals of the Būyids and the Qarmatians since he destroyed their libraries and burnt their writings.⁷⁹⁹

Jarādah, the other enemy in the narrative, represents a people whose culture and way of living were destroyed by invading Muslims. She struggled to have some kind of continuity with her past. Her presence and her worship of a statue undermine the Muslim piety to one God within the court of a political leader. Jarādah could represent several different forces at play in the time of al-Tha‘labī. Not all converts to Islam were necessarily indoctrinated in the faith or piety. In fact, most Khurāsānīs submitted to Islam under the patronage of an Arab *mawlā* to ensure their survival and many times the assigned *mawlā* was by no means a theologian or an expert on religious matters, thus the Muslim spirituality was not well integrated in the lives of all Muslims. Also, some converts were Muslims not by conviction but by necessity,

⁷⁹⁷ Al-Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is*, 324-325 / *Tales*, 542.

⁷⁹⁸ Nāzīm, *The life and times*, 160.

⁷⁹⁹ Nāzīm, *The life and times*, 160.

according to the new world order of Islam. Jarādah represents such converts, for her patron was Solomon (her *mawlā*). She is pious in her worship of the statue of her father and her piety indicates a nostalgia of her past which she lost by force and a lack of conviction of the Muslim message. Hence the issue of being a Muslim without being a faithful *jihādī* to promote Islam is embedded in her story.

5.9 Concluding thoughts

What do al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī contribute to an understanding of enmity, and what counsel do they offer to their temporal rulers? The stories of Joseph, David and Solomon offer narrative variations on enmity: internally in family circles and among close friends and associates; and externally from non-Muslims.

In contrast, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and Kay Kāʾūs focus on political enmity from outside the family circle. This shows that the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* are not to reiterate in narrative stories commonly held assumptions about rulers in general; these tales offer flexible nuances and in some cases realistic view of the challenges that confront rulers of all times. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and Kay Kāʾūs do not consider enmity in family circles or as a result of domestic violence, their emphasis is on court politics. They associate enmity with secrets which when decoded can be used to conquer the enemy (Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and Kay Kāʾūs). In the case of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ it is a search for weaknesses or defects which could be common to a leader and his enemy, and which must through self-knowledge be recognized by the leader and purged. Kay Kāʾūs is more militant in dealing with an enemy whose defeat is a cause of pride and glory.

The focus for al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī is on how a ruler should react in the face of calamity. Al-Ṭabarī acknowledges the political enemy in his narrative about

the prophets. However, “secrets” are not the foci of an attack against the enemy. They are implicit in the narrative but they are the points of departure by which to deal with the enemy. Secrets, trickery and deceit are problems, usually domestically centred, but not always (Joseph’s aunt and stepbrothers; David’s father-in-law and Goliath; the initial enmity between Solomon and Bilqīs). All secrets are not necessarily dark forces in the life of a leader in these tales; Joseph as leader of Egypt uses family trickery to reconcile his family to himself.

Knowing he has the support of God, Joseph responds to family trickery with great composure and integrity. Family trickery keeps Joseph from his father and consequently he has to forge his own path to political leadership in and through the calamities he faces. Joseph, however, does not let enmity of others destroy him or warp him. He becomes a good and just ruler and represents the ideal leader in al-Ṭabarī. Jacob reacts to the enmity of others with the spiritual exercise of patience (*ṣabr*), for he believes that the malice done will come to the surface in time.

Although *ṣabr* is a Qur’ānic term, al-Ṭabarī uses to capture a quality of Jacob’s character in face of a calamity. Jacob is never fearful, rather he is collected, assertive and a believer. He turns to God in his effort to deal with circumstances beyond his control.

Al-Ṭabarī’s David is more complex than his Joseph. He shows initial qualities of courage and piety in the face of calamity. David reacts to the enmity of Goliath intuitively by implementing the simple techniques of war-craft which are effectively deadly; it is his interior courage (part of the pre-Islamic *al-murūʿat*) that al-Ṭabarī feels is essential in the face of calamity. But David is also the enemy to the

integrity of his prophetic life when he acquires a bathing woman and dispenses with her husband.

Finally, al-Ṭabarī's Solomon represents diplomacy which comes through understanding. Al-Ṭabarī does not believe in political hostility and aggression as the way to spread Islam. He believes in the type of *jihād* which calls for political diplomacy. Forced conversion remains a problem embodied in al-Ṭabarī's Jarādah. Bilqīs is called to Islam by diplomacy, not aggression and she accepts Islam completely. The advice to leaders is not subtle but clear that diplomacy is expected to gain converts; but enmity as it comes has to be faced by each leader.

Al-Ṭabarī offers a new perspective of the enemy in his context of an Islamic empire; the enemy is the one who violates and threatens the political sovereignty of a caliph or his religion. A Muslim leader opposes enmity through ṣabr, courage and a preference for the use of non-militant *jihād* to convert the enemy to Islam.

Al-Thaʿlabī reaches the same conclusion but from a very different perspective. It comes from his particular context at the edge of the empire. He reacts to enmity from the point of view of stereotyping, scapegoating and praying.

Jacob grieves for Joseph, demanding answers and suspecting the wrongdoing by Joseph's stepbrothers; *ṣabr* is only practised later. Joseph is guided by the angel inside the *Well of Sorrows*, who teaches him the power of prayer in dealing with adversity. Even al-Thaʿlabī's naming of the well, where Joseph is kept for four days, as the "Well of Sorrows" indicates a preference of living out the grief attested to the abduction of Joseph.

Thus expressions of grief and prayers reflect a cultural reality in Khurāsān when facing calamities. The fear of the enemy is palpable in the prayers, as if the end

of time is near. These prayers in al-Tha[°]labī's narratives directly link to the calamities: Joseph inside the well; David's intense lamentation; and Solomon's penance prayer (not found in al-Ṭabarī) for Jarādah's idolatry. Prayer arises from enmity which creates calamity, in an effort to amend the wrong done by the enemy, and to gain strength and purity in the face of the perils at hand.

The stereotyping of the enemy is another issue in al-Tha[°]labī's narrative. It represents the discomfort of Ṣūfism within Islam in Khurāsān. The wolf metaphor conveys the reality of the stereotyping and scapegoating of the Ṣūfis in al-Tha[°]labī's Khurāsān. The network of the Ṣūfī retreat *khānaqāhs* throughout the Khurāsān countryside were not yet acknowledged as part of the larger Islam. Al-Tha[°]labī's stance against stereotyping and scapegoating suggests that he was a unique Sunnī intellectual whose perspective of Sunnism exceeded that of al-Ṭabarī and the traditionalists in Baghdād of the tenth century. Where al-Ṭabarī views Sunnism as the right and proper path carved by *jihād*, al-Tha[°]labī broadens the notion of Sunnism to include sources not acknowledged by the traditionalists in Baghdād or near the centre of power. Al-Tha[°]labī views the Ṣūfis not as the enemy but as Muslims with a positive contribution to make to the overall formation of the Sunnī identity in Khurāsān. This alone suggests that al-Tha[°]labī warns the temporal leaders in Khurāsān against the scapegoating they exercise against Muslims of lower economic means, such as the Ṣūfis, in their midst.

Al-Tha[°]labī is against the use of warfare and brutality similar to al-Ṭabarī, but his warfare description is more brutal. He sees it as enmity fuelled by emotional hatred against the other. One sign of brutality, not found in al-Ṭabarī, is the act of beheading of the enemy, as a sign of a decisive victory. Al-Tha[°]labī showcases this

extreme brutality to make the point that although such actions may secure victory over the enemy they create enmity and do not guarantee conversion; like in al-Ṭabarī, al-Thaʿlabī favours the *jihād* of diplomacy to affect conversion. Converting the enemy to the Islamic faith seems to be the true triumph as long as conversion is genuine, accepted with conviction, and loyal to the prophets.

The author from Nīshāpūr proposes that diplomacy is the means by which to win over the enemy. He also suggests that leaders can best react to enmity by expressing an honest manifestation of grief matched with the discipline of prayer, for it will give them the strength to face their adversities. The scapegoating approach is not effective because it hides the seed of enmity rather than conquering it.

The *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* offer concrete guidance to rulers on how to deal with enmity. The overall advice is that brutality is not always the right approach to overcome the enemy; what Kay Kāʾūs suggests in *Qābūs-nāma*, that is, to brutally confront and gloat over a defeated enemy is not what al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī promote in their narrative unless it is the only recourse left among other options.

6.0 Final thoughts

In this thesis, I have examined the three themes of leadership, friendship and enmity in the two primary texts of al-Ṭabarī's *History* and al-Thaʿlabī's *Tales of the Prophets* (ʿArāʾis) from the two perspectives of the political centre and the edge of the empire. I have tried to draw some analogies that the audiences of al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī could have seen when reading the *qiṣaṣ* and comparing them to the political and social events in which the *qiṣaṣ* were compiled. It must be admitted that some of these analogies are more plausible than others, but I hope that at least they are all suggestive. In effect, the thesis is largely about how the *qiṣaṣ* construe a just Muslim leader who is shaped by the counsel and support of friends, and the cunning hostility of enemies as drawn from the wisdom of the *qiṣaṣ*. The friendship and enmity in these tales enhance leadership either for the better (Joseph and Solomon) or for the worse (David), depending on how well each prophet has accepted good counsel. Of the three prophets, Solomon stands between the ideal of Joseph's leadership and the shameful failure of David's political havoc. Solomon as the leader on the threshold, as it were of two paths, one leading to David's fate of lament and the other to Joseph's bliss of reconciliation. Our two authors from Baghdād and Nīshāpūr have drawn such a picture of the two paths of leadership: one leading to prosperity and the other to chaos and lament. This seems to be the *adab* function of the *qiṣaṣ*, common to both the centre and the edge.

Of the three prophets, Solomon is closest to the caliphal image aspired to in medieval Islam. He is everything a caliph desires to be: rich in his kingdom, well armed, wise in giving judgement, astute in political management of the empire, persuasive to monarchs, and faithful to God. He is the prototype of caliphs entrusted

to unify the empire by firm control and strong leadership. He is the type of leader who has been highly privileged with wisdom and fairness of judgment. However, he is not terribly admired by all his subjects. Among his qualities, his handling of power is less admirable and does not inspire loving obedience from his subjects; rather he imposes on them oppressive fear. He remains, nevertheless, faithful to God. Solomon is a prophet of sharp contradictions. The acquisition of women reflects the degree of Solomon's success in converting others to Islam. Not all women are submissive to him, an outcome he could not tolerate as seen in the stories of Jarādah. His stories reveal that a faithful leader can win converts to Islam more easily by diplomacy (Queen Bilqīs) than by military aggression (Jarādah). When he is deposed from his throne for a period of time under the influence of the evil genius of Şakhr, he gets a foretaste of his own aggression towards the kingdom of Sidon. Eventually, Solomon regains his kingdom and punishes Şakhr.

David, on the other hand, starts at the margin of existence, coming from a much more humble beginning. Initially, he is not presented with his brothers to the prophet Samuel in his search for a new leader for Israel, because of his small physical stature. As he kills Goliath, he becomes the centre of Israelite attention as their saviour from outside aggression; in reaction and jealousy, King Saul (his father-in-law) fails to put an end to David or even to succeed in marginalising him. David's piety is excessive and at times admired by God; but when David starts to admire his own pious self his downfall becomes imminent. David's pride, which leads to the false perception that he can live a day without temptation, prompts God to warn him to be watchful. He does not heed God's counsel which causes his popularity to fall drastically in the eyes of his people. David never recovers his popularity and he

laments for a long time. In contrast to Solomon's Bilqīs, David's lustful acquisition of a married woman (Bathsheba) becomes the cause of his shame. As a result he can no longer joyfully sing his psalms. His opportunities for joy in singing the psalms are lost as they become one, long lamentation. David becomes his own worst enemy because he has not heeded the counsel of God, his only friend.

However, David proves to be the prototype of the military commander or guardian of national security. He protects Muslims from aggressive foreign forces, as embodied by Goliath. He represents the true Muslim *jihādī* when he conquers Goliath. But David is also a model of penance because of the sorry state of a moral failure. These two responsibilities are central to the rulers of Baghdād and Nīshāpūr: leaders are supposed to protect their people and critically examine their own moral failures.

The episodes in Joseph's life have brought him full circle in their enrichment of his attitude towards life and service. His life begins with a protected childhood when he is favoured by his father over all of Joseph's step-brothers. When he is sold, Joseph lives as a slave in the rich house of his owner, then he becomes a prisoner for seven years; these are the years which form him, living on the edge of society, completely marginalised by his adversaries. What saves Joseph's integrity are two acts: heeding his father's voice against fornication, and interpreting dreams. His talent as an interpreter of dreams opens up a whole new path for him which results in his becoming a politician who is trusted throughout the whole of Egypt. He proves to be a clever leader by interpreting dreams in terms of unfolding future possibilities. His life experiences make him the ideal leader: from a loved child to a beloved ruler.

The prototype of the prophet Joseph lies in his disposition to lead an entire foreign country on the threshold of the natural disaster of famine. He is a foreign ruler in a country that is not his birth-place (Egypt). Instead of using aggression to ascend to the throne, he uses his divinely endowed talent to wisely interpret the dream of another king. His political service as the new head of Egypt is rooted in the wisdom of his altruistic character. Joseph is a leader of hope who transforms an impending disaster to a new reality of prosperity. His leadership delivers an entire nation from famine. The narratives of Joseph parallel historical situations where foreign Muslim rulers governed in countries not their own – Arab rulers in Persia and Persian/Turkish rulers in Arabia especially during the later period of the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty. The implicit advice from both al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī to rulers is to be agents of hope in the expanded Islamic empire.

In the narratives of Joseph and Solomon, there is a similar cycle of events in their leadership: these two prophets move from popularity to marginality and back to popularity. In the case of David, it is rather the opposite which takes place: marginality to popularity and back to marginality. Only David does not recover fully his loss of integrity because he has not heeded the counsel from his only friend, God. This is not the case with Solomon and Joseph. Solomon heeds the counsel of demons/*jinn* and at times that of the ants; Joseph accepts Jacob's counsel against fornication. It is the acceptance of good counselling which marks the true leadership of a Muslim ruler. This seems to be the common advice from both al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī. It is time to re-capitulate how our two authors differ in offering advice on leadership, friendship and enmity. Their narratives demonstrate indebtedness to the key issues of their cultural contexts.

6.1 Al-Ṭabarī's centre: what does he advise in his narrative accounts?

Al-Ṭabarī was a product of his time, an elite religious Sunnī scholar with a careful eye on the sources of his narrative detail. This is where the integrity of his scholarship lies. He was the quintessential scholar of the *ḥadīth*, the Qurʾān and the *fiqh*, and he was an Arabist of Persian origin. His historiography is no less scholarly, seeing time as the unfolding of world history through prophets and their successors. Al-Ṭabarī's Joseph, David and Solomon in his *History* illustrate dramas of the struggle between fidelity to the Islamic faith and the tempting lure of power. Al-Ṭabarī does not advise or promote a particular way of government⁸⁰⁰ but he reports the details of these prophets from what he has collected from reputable sources without using any allegorical way of writing for hidden meaning. Nor does al-Ṭabarī oppose the caliphate. In this way, *History* does not function to develop a radically new type of Muslim leadership. After all, al-Ṭabarī resided in the same region of the city as the caliph's palace was situated and had no intention of creating undue hostility within such a short distance.

Despite his scholarly reputation among the religious elite, al-Ṭabarī was nevertheless marginalised by the popular Ḥanbalī movement; yet, not all traditionalists in Baghdād were hostile to him. The iconic figure of Ibn Ḥanbal was too popular to overcome in Baghdād, but that did not deter al-Ṭabarī from pioneering in his writing of *History*, and from promoting of a Muslim polity of the caliphate in line with the prophetic leadership. His *History* presents compendia of Sunnī sources

⁸⁰⁰ Mårtensson argues that al-Ṭabarī's methodology of his *History* has an implicit political message to the caliphate which is expected to run a rational government with applied logic and deduction. See her "Ṭabarī", 53-54.

and tradition from which ancient prophets are viewed. In this way, al-Ṭabarī sees the history of prophets as a repository of advice for the caliphs of his time. The prophets in the tales are prototypes for rulers either through moral excellence to emulate or moral failure to avoid.

Given his elitist position in Baghdād, al-Ṭabarī had implicit critical attitude against rulers, even though he did not oppose the caliphate. Specifically, al-Ṭabarī's perspective of leadership is narrowly defined to undermine the superficiality of monarchs whose lifestyles had already seeped into the lives of the caliphs in Baghdād. He wants to strip the caliphate from monarchical symbolism and propaganda; caliphs are not meant to be monarchs. The fact that Joseph is not a king with a crown as his royal symbol in al-Ṭabarī, challenges the caliphate to deliberately distance itself from a royal lifestyle and symbolic events like coronations. In this way, al-Ṭabarī does not embrace all aspects of the pre-Islamic Persian monarchy as part of the Muslim heritage. It is equally true that al-Ṭabarī promotes a political liberation from royal expressions, even though his *History* is not a political treatise. It is hardly surprising that al-Ṭabarī demonstrates such a view in his writing against the lure of monarchies since his lifestyle was marked with simplicity and truthfulness based on religious conviction, which he integrated into himself. Royalty and its privileges were not the values he propagated. As mentioned in Chapter Two, he even refused privileges from others in order to safeguard his scholarly reputation. The privileges associated with social status are not the Muslim ideal for him. Therefore his perspective of leadership is to function in simplicity and integrity and far from superficial privileges. Even in his account of King Solomon, the building of the Temple is barely mentioned and all considerable detail of its splendour is omitted.

Al-Ṭabarī has a political inclination towards simplicity and towards the ethical ideal expected of a ruler. This is where he challenges the caliphate of his time.

The emphasis on the ethical side of a ruler is further stressed in al-Ṭabarī's account of David. David is the first prophet-king among all the prophets in *History*. Yet David does not fare better than both Goliath (the oppressor of Israel) and Saul (the king who disobeyed God) because he oppresses Uriah to death and disobeys God by not being watchful as commanded. Al-Ṭabarī cannot envision a leadership devoid of moral decency and the caliphs of his time were not excused to conduct an immoral life.

In terms of friendship, al-Ṭabarī does not share the advice of Ibn al-Muqaffa^c and Kay Kā'ūs against sharing secrets. He shares their idea that the gem of friendship is in good counsel; obedience and risk-taking loyalty are expected from friends of the ruler. Ultimately, al-Ṭabarī views friendship rather than the splendours of monarchy as beneficial for the stability of the empire which was lacking in his time. Yet, in the early years of the tenth century, the friendship between vizier al-Qāsim °Abd Allāh and Caliph al-Muktafi brought a sense of stability needed at the time. Once again, al-Ṭabarī seems to be concerned about the *stability* and *unity* of the empire.

Al-Ṭabarī's perspective of enmity is one of daily reality in the empire, and he advises that enmity be faced through either or all of the following: *ṣabr* (Jacob in Joseph's story), courage and military defence of all Muslims (David) and the exercise of diplomacy or non-militant *jihād* (Solomon). *Jihād* is a communal effort to protect Muslims from non-Muslim threats and to promote the faith in new territories. David's case against Goliath's aggression is the prime example of Muslim protection

but not so when dispensing with Uriah who presents no threat to David. Likewise with Solomon's dethronement of the King of Sidon; aggression is hardly apt to spread the message of Islam in comparison to the non-militant *jihād* with Queen Bilqīs. Al-Ṭabarī presents to the reader a non-aggressive and diplomatic *jihād* in spreading Islam to new territories rather than military aggression to impose Islam on foreign territories. Like good counsel, the message of Islam should not be imposed.

6.2 Al-Tha'labī : what does he advise in the 'Arā'is?

Al-Tha'labī is another prominent scholar whose biographical information does not permit us to say much about his personal life and intellectual activities, but we can speak of his thoughts. His time in Nīshāpūr occurred under the transition from the Sāmānid to the Ghaznavid regime by the late tenth century. This was a time when the Sunnī identity was less defined in Nīshāpūr than in Baghdād because the movement towards establishing traditionalism was still in progress among the main legal schools of the Ḥanafīs and the Shāfī'īs. Concurrently, the mystical movement was already in operation in Khurāsān, an obvious factor in the 'Arā'is. Though al-Tha'labī seems to have been a patrician, as argued in Chapter Two, given his religious expertise, his style of writing is more inclusive of Islamic movements of his time than al-Ṭabarī had allowed a century earlier. He allowed the weak sources of information to be equal to the strong ones; in this way he widened the Islamic view of knowledge by including the Ṣūfīsm which was marginalised a century earlier in Baghdād. Therefore al-Tha'labī was a Muslim intellectual who made use of wider Islamic sources in his scholarship than al-Ṭabarī.

Al-Tha°labī tends to include the mystical-inspired piety in his narrative, along with some religious qualities attached to the prophets. He describes Joseph as *°ālim* and a *ḥāfīz*, while David is described in a long ritual of intense prayerful lamentation which is pregnant with concepts of God as the Creator of light, giver of covenants, and the judge of all humanity; Solomon in all his majesty converses with a religious Ṣūfī, embodied by an ant. In addition al-Tha°labī mentions more than once the Prophet Muḥammad and draws out analogies between his life and those of the Biblical prophets, in order to create a familiar echo in the prophetic family throughout the ages. Consequently, there is a stronger prophetology of Muḥammad in the *°Arā°is* than in *Ta°rīkh*. The ascetic tradition in Nīshāpūr emphasised that Muslims should keep the life of Muḥammad alive in their daily living. Al-Tha°labī's religiosity is a great part of his *adab*-prose technique in order to heighten the expectation toward prophets and rulers in history. He really expects from rulers in his narrative that they uphold religious excellence and ritual observance as part of the integrity of their leadership. In this way, he tends to agree with the Twelvers' expectation of their living *imāms*. Such a process of writing magnifies further the sanctity of history through the models of Biblical prophets.

In addition to the religious flavour of his writing, al-Tha°labī tends also to describe his three prophets in terms of royalty. He sharply differs from al-Ṭabarī in this feature. For example, al-Tha°labī's Joseph is a prophet-king, not so in al-Ṭabarī. The coronation of Joseph whilst the current king of Egypt is still alive shows a lot of tolerance to royalty unprecedented in al-Ṭabarī. Al-Tha°labī includes royal images laden with religious descriptions of leaders.

On the one hand, the combined intensity between royalty and religion shows the cultural background of Khurāsān, a region rich in the memory of the Sasanian past and its royal culture. On the other hand, it reveals that the spread of Islam did not triumph entirely over the institution of the monarchy. Instead of overcoming the monarchical images, it seems that Islam in Khurāsān assimilated them. This is a major departure from al-Ṭabarī's understanding of royalty in terms of its superficial appearance. Unlike in al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha'labī does not address royalty as superficial in appearance but as part of a successful leadership and political craftsmanship. However, al-Tha'labī was not a royal propagandist as seen in the discussion between Solomon and the lame ant. He was aware of the influence of the Ṣūfīs against the injustice that royalists might have inflicted on the lower social classes.

The relationship between al-Tha'labī and Ṣūfism seems to be more than casual. Both Saleh⁸⁰¹ and Klar think that al-Tha'labī was not likely a Ṣūfī, but at least he was interested in the mystical ideas.⁸⁰² His Nīshāpūrī milieu was characterised by a strong mystical piety and Ṣūfism was capable of absorbing the mystical Malāmatiyya of Nīshāpūr by the time al-Tha'labī was born. However, it seems that the spirit of Malāmatiyya spirituality was not long gone in al-Tha'labī's time to combat whatever was left of the Karrāmiyya pride in their exoteric piety, just before they were ousted from Khurāsān by the Ghaznavids. It seems that al-Tha'labī is critical of the path of self-blame (or excessive Malāmatiyya) in his narrative of David because David does not recover through the path of self-blame. As indicated in Chapter Three, the Malāmatis opposed public profile and were likely not sympathetic

⁸⁰¹ Saleh, *The formation*, 56-65.

⁸⁰² See the footnote n.4 in M. Klar's "Stories of the Prophets", in *Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by Andrew Rippin (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 348.

to the patricians of Nīshāpūr. Their spirituality of constant self-reflection against pride and social ambition must have left an impact on al-Tha°labī's thought and his city-context. For example, his David's lamentation in al-Tha°labī entails a long, thirty year period of self-blame, which suggests a Malāmatiyya spirit still in action, even after it was absorbed by the Šūfīs. The narrative of David's repentance can be viewed as a critique by al-Tha°labī against such a spirituality of self-blame which does not seem to resolve the acceptance of God's mercy and forgiveness – David has such a difficult time accepting God's forgiveness despite the fact that he has been promised that he will be the first to drink from the chalice of wine on the Day of Resurrection.⁸⁰³

This explains two things about al-Tha°labī. Firstly, it provides a plausible reason why he did not join the Šūfī movement given what is known about the mystical spirituality of self-blame through the Malāmatiyya in his town – it constantly puts down one's ambitions and talents. In fact, not all Šūfīs embraced Malāmatiyya spirituality.⁸⁰⁴ Secondly, the scant information on al-Tha°labī in the biographical dictionaries somehow corresponds to the low profile propagated by Malāmatiyya especially for the religious figures in Nīshāpūr. Despite his pioneering Qur°ānic expertise and his reputation as a much sought-after teacher, it seems that the Malāmatiyya's social effect against promoting an individual's expertise was still dominant in Nīshāpūr during al-Tha°labī's time.

Yet, al-Tha°labī was not against all kinds of mystical teaching. In the story of Solomon and his interlocutor, the lame ant, there is a more positive side attributed to the mysticism of the *heart* which al-Tha°labī seems to embrace. Given that the *heart*

⁸⁰³ See *Arā°is*, 477.

⁸⁰⁴ See my footnote, n. 324, in Chapter 2.3.4, 113.

is a throne of authority in knowing right from wrong, al-Tha[°]labī's critique of the rulers and the social structure of Nīshāpūr lie in the dialogues between Solomon and the ants. On the one hand, there is a necessity of shared wisdom between mystics and world leaders (such as Solomon), and on the other hand, al-Tha[°]labī presents a direct objection to social classes in Nīshāpūr when they fail to correspond with one another. This also means that al-Tha[°]labī views the intellectual Sunnī Islam as being inclusive of the Ṣūfī-oriented wisdom of the *heart* as well as of the *ilm* oriented *madrassa* learning institution (which was developing at his time). All the social classes of Nīshāpūr constitute a society - not just the elite and the wealthy. This inclusive social view is paralleled in al-Tha[°]labī's use of a variety of sources, the weak and the strong, for his narrative.

Contrary to the cautionary thoughts of Ibn al-Muqaffa[°] and Kay Kā[°]ūs against sharing secrets, al-Tha[°]labī propagates the sharing of secrets of the *heart* as a means to good counsel. He does not separate secrets from good counsel but rather he encourages his rulers to enhance their friendships with the marginalised members of society in order to receive wisdom from those of pure heart. Harmony amongst the social classes is an essential feature of al-Tha[°]labī's advice. The voluntary poverty of the Ṣūfīs indicates that they have nothing to lose by sharing the secrets of their pure *hearts* to enlighten their rulers of Khurāsān. After all, the Ṣūfīs thrive on detachment from worldly temptation. This suggests that the harmony between patricians and the lowly class of the Ṣūfīs is dependent on the sharing of good counsel. Al-Tha[°]labī seems to view the Ṣūfīs as potential friends of rulers and willing members of the society to aid leaders in their governance.

Given al-Tha°labī's more egalitarian spirit, his views on enmity include a warning against the stereotyping of the enemy – the wolf as a metaphor of the Şūfī network activities – because this supposed enemy can show respect to the prophets and refrain from devouring their flesh or annihilating their mission. This provides an opening for a fresh view of the enemy as a potential helper who will share his secret wisdom rather than a perceived threat. Al-Tha°labī, not surprisingly, offers the religious reaction of prayer in the face of hostility as embodied in Jacob's attitude when he first hears about the alleged wolf's attack on his son. Once again, al-Tha°labī's leaders are expected to embody deeply religious attitudes.

Yet, al-Tha°labī shows more brutality – he gives a detailed account of beheading of Goliath- than al-Ṭabarī. The brutality as a narrative detail is part of the message against hostility which had been going on by the Turkish Ghaznavids after they took over from the Sāmānids. In Chapter Five, I mentioned Tāsh Farrāsh's brutal activities against the people in Ray and Jibāl. This was aggression between Muslims after the increase of converted Turks into Islam. Therefore al-Tha°labī favours diplomatic *jihād* as does in al-Ṭabarī. The unanimous perspectives of diplomatic *jihād* between the centre and the edge indicate that the doctrine of *jihād* at the time was well in place in the Islamic tradition across the central and eastern part of the empire.

6.3 The advisory function of the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*

Finally, what is the advisory nature of the *qiṣaṣ* in al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha°labī? Both authors have given different advice on leadership, friendship and enmity of the same three prophets. The nuances of their advice correspond to the events and

movements of their time and in their regional contexts. The centre and the edge have developed *qiṣaṣ* narratives with different appropriation of the pre-Islamic past; the centre is lukewarm about royalty whereas the edge gives it a deliberate expression. However, they agree that courage to face enmity (*murūʿat* or manly virtue), is a well accepted pre-Islamic virtue, and both the centre and the edge propagate good counsel for the ruler to incorporate into his governance. In this way, the *qiṣaṣ* function no less than *adab*-prose in accepting social values from the past to appropriate them for the present. This is similar to what al-Jāḥiẓ alluded to, in Chapter One.

The *qiṣaṣ* are neither written instructions addressed directly to the rulers, as wisdom literature, nor do they offer formulas of political etiquette such as in the *Mirrors for Princes* or the *Adab al-kabīr*; rather, the *qiṣaṣ* are stories (parables) to explain something of the meaning of history⁸⁰⁵ in relation to the episodes the prophets experienced. On the one hand, the *qiṣaṣ* describe the uniqueness of each prophet who is called from his historical community to live a mission; and on the other hand, the *qiṣaṣ* highlight the fact that prophecy is essentially about leadership enhanced by friendship and shaped by enmity. The audience of the *qiṣaṣ* tend to be the learned who read and understand Arabic and that includes not just the rulers specifically but also those interested in knowing about what is expected of leaders. These stories then serve as advice literature from outside the court given that al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī were not court employees, but their stories can be viewed as means of critical assessment of their rulers.

⁸⁰⁵ The *qiṣaṣ* in their capacity to include pre-Islamic values, and provide contextual meaning to the readers assert that the *qiṣaṣ* are truly fulfilling the same role as the *adab* prose in its function of preserving values from the past.

In my Introduction, I gave a hypothetical definition of the *qiṣaṣ* as compendia of the accounts of the prophets which implicitly advise temporal Muslim rulers about the Muslim ideals of the expected conduct of leadership in their social contexts. It is now the time to refine this definition further: the *qiṣaṣ* are advice literature in parables describing the struggles of Muslim rulers to receive good counsel in friendship in order to deal with enmity and to govern with fairness. In this way, al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī unanimously viewed rulers as being on a constant search for the wisdom required either for the stability of the empire (al-Ṭabarī) or for the harmony of its social classes (al-Thaʿlabī). Both saw the health of the empire as being closely linked to the pragmatic wisdom which rulers could derive from the life-lessons of the ancient prophets and from the subjects whom they governed. Essentially, a sound leadership is the one which accepts good counsel and acts upon it.

Finally, in our very recent time, the Arab Spring heightens the thirst for fair leadership following decades of corrupt governments which mostly benefitted the ruling families. If history repeats itself, this is because ancient wisdom from history of prophets has not been incorporated to enlighten the path of a ruler. Although there is no longer a caliphate institution to succeed ancient prophets, the narrative prose of the *qiṣaṣ* can testify that lessons from prophets are not obsolete. Al-Ṭabarī has something to teach us that the stability and flourishing of a state reflect the soundness of its government; while al-Thaʿlabī adds that all social classes are to cooperate in unison for leaders to govern with the wisdom of all citizens. It is time to re-visit the *qiṣaṣ* to shape a leadership worthy of a future.

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